SECOND EDITION

Michael Rabiger

DEVELOPING STORY IDEAS

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Focal Press

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DEVELOPING STORY IDEAS

Second Edition

Michael Rabiger

ELSEVIER

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Focal Press

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Focal Press is an imprint of Elsevier
30 Corporate Drive, Suite 400, Burlington, MA 01803, USA
Linacre House, Jordan Hill, Oxford OX2 8DP, UK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Rabiger, Michael.
Developing story ideas/Michael Rabiger. — 2nd ed.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-240-80736-7 (alk. paper)
1. Motion picture authorship. 2. Playwriting. 3. Plots (Drama, novel, etc.) I. Title

PN1996.R16 2005
808.2'3 — dc22 2005051340

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 13: 978-0-240-80736-2
ISBN 10: 0-240-80736-7

For information on all Focal Press publications visit our website at www.books.elsevier.com

05 06 07 08 09 10 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America

Working together to grow
libraries in developing countries
www.elsevier.com | www.bookaid.org | www.sabre.org
ELSEVIER BOOK AID International Sabre Foundation

In fond memory of Lois Deacon, who said,
"Nothing is real until I have written about it."

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Introduction

If you like writing but get frustrated by characters who refuse to come alive, plots that fizzle, or story ideas that all feel secondhand, this book will prove exhilarating and freeing. Using minimal jargon and speaking directly to you as a colleague, its advice and many practical assignments will help you generate a fund of your own story ideas—and have great pleasure doing it. Though addressed to prospective screenwriters, the book's work is foundational and can lead just as easily to projects in prose fiction, theater, radio, or journalism.

The story development work all takes place in outline form, so critique and further work really bear fruit, for this is a workout manual in *ideation*—that is, in finding and developing the core ideas and the personal connections that underpin all good stories and lend them impact.

A book like this is necessary because telling stories—so natural and easy for the very young—gets more difficult as we grow up. We become self-conscious and self-critical. Academic education compounds the problem by herding us into large, competitive, and impersonal institutions. Most schooling concentrates on facts, objectivity, and rote memorization, and this makes self-exploration seem indulgent and irrelevant. But we come into possession of ourselves only if we connect—emotionally, imaginatively, and spiritually—with others. Humans have always done this through telling and listening to stories. Stories are the oxygen of civilization and the elixir of sanity and wisdom; we must both hear them and tell them if we are to survive and prosper.

My half-century of professional involvement with storytelling and storytellers has convinced me that each person is deeply marked by key experiences, and so each has moving stories to tell. Doing this well means first looking inward. In order to develop your creativity and individual "voice" you will need to access, value, and build upon what you carry within. This

book is about the midwifery that makes this happen. All the conceptual tools and assignments are simply explained through everyday analogies and a minimum of jargon. You will also learn something of a storyteller's capacity for acting and showmanship, for a successful screen author must be able to change roles at will from subjective to objective, from "pitching" ideas to listening or reacting as an audience member, critic, or analyst. There is curiously little in print as guidance through these vital parts of the writer's creative process.

Most people learn best through *making* something, so there are more than 50 hands-on assignments to get you working with observation, imagery, memory, and other resources. We begin with some fascinating self-assessment assignments. These help you draw a self-profile and decide provisionally what you alone have to say. Other assignments show how to exploit a great range of observational, pictorial, and written resources. You will use observations from immediate life to play a hilarious game of improvisation that exercises your intuition and helps strengthen your confidence. There are childhood and family-based assignments, others that involve oral or traditional story sources and others still that involve dreams. You will also practice adapting short stories and reality-based stories, and the final challenges are assignments using fiction and documentary. The assignments increase in length and complexity and call for you to control differing points of view.

The assignments integrate practice, theory, and discussion and ask you to use your "unfinished business"—meaning the sublimated personal agenda that we are apt to pursue only at an unconscious level. Through hands-on work, an emphasis on self-actualization, and through working (if possible) in a learning community, you can expect to develop a significant body of work and form the kind of partnerships that make creating anything in the arts so gratifying and life enhancing.

With each creative assignment comes a sampling of student work. From my discussions you see how one employs the concepts, attitudes, and respectful language of critical response, and how dramatic principles explained earlier emerge in context. Where it is useful, each chapter ends with a select bibliography headed "Going Farther."

In its final chapters the book demonstrates story editing, how to use the dramatic conventions to strengthen your work, and how to set about expanding an outline into a full-length work of fiction or nonfiction. Examples and guidelines help you turn your favorite outlines into a short story, novel, stage play, or cinema screenplay.

This new edition contains important additional material. Chapters 7–10 lay out a "tool kit" of concepts that you can use to assess any part of any story in any medium. Included are methods to:

- Handle the different roles you play while taking part in developing a story; that is, when you are by turns an author, story editor, presenter, audience member, or critic.

- Develop a character and understand the difference between stereotypes and archetypes, as well as between "flat" and "round" characters.
- Discriminate between the component parts of a scene.
- Break a complex work into a functional, three-act structure.
- Assess and graph a scene or a complete work and represent its varying intensity as a dramatic arc.
- Analyze any story in any form for its effectiveness, meaning, and purpose.
- Decide how to handle a story's point(s) of view most effectively.

Chapter 15 contains a new feature that many people will find invaluable—a comprehensive strategy for breaking down a literary work, analyzing its contents, and evaluating it for adaptation to the screen. Many good people contributed to this book. I am indebted to the New York University Film Department faculty for their discussions and friendship, in particular Lora Hays, George Stoney, Ken Dancyger, Marketa Kimbrell, and Nick Tanis. I must also thank Dean Mary Schmidt Campbell, who kindly invited me to NYU in the first place for a wonderful year of teaching.

I owe much gratitude to my NYU students, who generously permitted me to reproduce their writing. Their hard work and infectious enthusiasm made our classes a joy, and without them there would literally be no book. They came from France, Korea, Norway, Mexico, Britain, Canada, and of course the United States. Thank you Michelle Arnove, Bryan Beasley, Leah Cho, Chris Darnley, Paul Flanagan, Angela Galean, Michael Hanttula, Margaret Harris, Kundong Lee, Louis Leterrier, Amanda McCormick, Alex Meilleur, Cynthia Merwath, Tatsuyo Ohno, Joy Park, Peter Riley, Trish Rosen, Vilka Tzouras, Sharmaine Webb, and Julie Werenskiold.

At Focal Press my gratitude goes to Elinor Actipis, Cara Anderson, Marie Lee, Karen Speerstra, Christine Tridente, and the rest of the staff for their friendship, long-term support, and warm encouragement. At my home institution of Columbia College Chicago I am especially grateful to my esteemed and overworked colleagues Doreen Bartoni, Cari Callis, and Joe Steiff. They critiqued the entire manuscript of the first edition, contributing a wealth of ideas and corrections. To this edition, Ross Murray, Thomas O'Connor, Kimberly Seilhamer, and Rob Sabal gave invaluable feedback and Joe Steiff generously read the new draft as well, offering yet more excellent suggestions. Thanks also are due to Paul Ruddock for present and past help. With so much assistance all around, the remaining errors are truly my own.

My toughest critic is my wife, Nancy Mattei. I offer her my heartfelt appreciation for her contributions to my work and for putting up so gracefully with a writer's antisocial work habits.

Michael Rabiger
Chicago, 2005

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PART I

OVERVIEW

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1

This Book, Its Goals, and Getting Started

This book, about discovering and developing deeply felt ideas for stories, means to take you enjoyably through the writer's creative process so you can generate first-rate story ideas of your own. It will show how the roots of stories are to be found within, and help you to work from the inside outwards.

You can use the book by yourself and work through the assignments in your own way. Particularly in the earlier chapters, multiple assignments permit alternative focuses, and you should not hesitate to choose whatever you find most attractive.

To be original in what you create asks that you take risks, create actively and repeatedly, and create not in isolation but *with and for* other people. The book will show you how to engage others as your audience and use their reactions as the stepping-stones to a finer understanding. If you intend facilitating a group or teaching with this book, consult its website for further notes and help (www.focalpress.com). There you will find a friendly discussion of the teaching process as well as extensive suggestions for making a plan or syllabus.

The assignments in this book offer:

- An approach compatible with radio, journalism, television, literary fiction, and theater as well as the cinema.
- Work geared to anyone seeking to create more and better stories.
- Ways to value and make use of your formative experience.
- Private self-assessment exercises to help you form a working notion of your artistic identity.
- Clear and graphic descriptions of dramaturgical tools and terminology. These often appear in a sidebar (see example).

- A range of ways to prime the creative process so you never need suffer from writer's block.
- Access to personal and communal resources that any writer can draw on.
- Short writing assignments concentrating on essence, not length or polished form.
- An egalitarian approach to fiction and nonfiction that recognizes the presence of each in the other.
- Writing samples and accompanying critique to demonstrate dramatic analysis.
- Ways to work with others instead of compete with them.
- Ways to give and take constructive critique.
- Ways to expand your favorite outlines into short story, novel, play, or cinema screenplay.

Sidebars like this appear throughout the book. Sometimes they contain pertinent advice or instructions, but mostly they define terms or concepts. Key words are italicized in the sidebar, and often in the accompanying text too. Use the index at any time to locate whatever you need.

If you are part of a class or writing collaboration, you can expect:

- Your partner, group leader, or teacher to adapt the book to his or her preferences and experience.
- To get valuable experience from presenting your ideas to peers as a group.
- To participate in a nonjudgmental community where theory, practice, and critique take place in an atmosphere of supportive friendship and enthusiasm.
- To get to know the other group members unusually well and to become known and valued by them.
- To find a partner or partners that you will want to write with, perhaps professionally.

PLAYING ROLES

Working as an author is intriguing because you have to adopt different roles. With each you use different skills and disciplines:

- **Author.** This is the identity that generates the raw material and demands that you be instinctive, intuitive, and anarchic. Whatever you see, hear, or imagine while you are writing goes down on paper without a second thought. You follow no procedure except what your imagination demands.

- **Analyst.** Change to this role whenever you review written material, whether your own, or someone else's. Like a documentary film editor confronting a great mass of raw footage captured on the run, you analyze and categorize the materials, then structure them into the linearity of a story. When you are story editing, help is always available from the storehouse of dramatic and storytelling traditions and principles.
- **Presenter.** You assume a showman identity when you "pitch" a story idea, no matter whether your audience is one person or a roomful. This personality, however, has two modes—active and receptive.
    - **Active Mode:** While telling the story you try to captivate your audience by imagining they are the first audience for your film (novel, play, short story, poem, etc.). From their facial and physical reactions you will quickly sense how effective your story is, moment to moment. Their presence produces strong convictions about where the story is working and where it needs changes and development. This, of course is, how comedians learn their craft.
    - **Receptive Mode:** After the pitch, listen attentively to what your audience can tell you. It is vital not to argue or explain. Simply ask open-ended questions and absorb from your masters, the audience. If you are pitching not as the story's author but as, say, its producer, it is vital to note down everything the audience says for the author to consider.

> *Pitching* a story means making a 3- to 5-minute oral presentation that enables the listener(s) to envisage the characters, events, and purpose of the tale. Pitches are common in Hollywood, and also at festivals and conferences where judges or other groups must decide whose project merits support.

- **Audience/Critic.**
    - **Audience.** You adopt this attentive, respectful, layman identity whenever someone presents their work. Keep an open mind, and remember what feelings, thoughts, and reactions the work provoked in you so you can describe them faithfully back to the author.
    - **Critic.** Whenever you set out to communicate a work's effect, you become a critic offering constructive feedback. Start with what you found effective, and then respectfully suggest what you think needs change or development. Good critics avoid intellectualizing. They address what the storyteller is trying to accomplish through the story, never how they would have handled the idea themselves.

The challenge is to keep these roles separate. When you are writing in Author mode, your Analyst persona will try to rise up, instruct, and generally inhibit you. Or when your pitch comes under critique, the Author and Analyst in you will get up on their hind legs to defend it. These impulses you must master or you won't be able to take anything in. Becoming professional means keeping to the appropriate role, and this takes practice and self-awareness. You'll get a real sense of accomplishment once you can switch cleanly between them.

YOU AND YOUR RESOURCES

Novice writers often feel that nothing worth writing about has really happened to them. This leaves them feeling inadequate to develop story ideas, plots, or story structures. The temptation is to emulate the style of an admired writer or director, and to work from the outside inward. I believe, however, that once you reach your teens you have already seen at least a minor version of almost everything that life can offer. Directly or indirectly you have experienced victory, defeat, love, hate, being thrown out of Eden, death—everything. So what a young person lacks is not experience, but knowing how to recognize, value, and shape it. A key lies in what Herman Melville called "the shock of recognition," and what Thomas Hardy called "moments of vision." Both authors mean those instants of piercing clarity when a special truth or meaning rises up to hit you between the eyes. This book shows you where to look for such insights and what to do with them once you find them. They are the keys to the multitude of moving and effective stories that you assuredly carry within. Priming the pump is this book's purpose.

WHY WE WORK IN OUTLINE FORM

Everything you write will be in scene outline form. This is an ideal development form because it concentrates on visualizing action and elaborating the plot, and leaves dialogue and other detail for a later stage. Changes are easily made to an outline, and improvements show up quickly and clearly.

A story in outline is also amenable to being "pitched," that is, presented in short oral form. In audience-oriented media like theater and film, audience reactions to nascent ideas are a morale booster and an important reality check.

Writing in outline keeps your basic ideas compact and everything that matters remains visible and handy for adjustment. Once several audiences say the outline feels right and complete, it will be a straightforward matter to expand it into a screenplay, short story, or other narrative form.

IDEATION AND ORIGINALITY

All accomplished authors seem to agree that there is but one prerequisite for becoming a writer, and that is to keep writing, no matter what. Being original does not mean going where no man hath trod but instead working persistently in your chosen area until you reach gold. This takes taste and determined work, for driving an idea to greater depths means refusing to accept what's only so-so. Everybody's early ideas are banal and similar, and most people make the mistake of hurrying on to write their "finished" version far too soon. By then, trying to improve the basic *ideation* is like trying to alter the steelwork after the building's gone up.

> *Ideation* is the process of finding and developing the ideas that underpin a creative endeavor. Like a building's foundation, a good story idea must be singularly appropriate for what it must support.

You can always test how far you have come by simply pitching the latest version to anyone who'll listen. You'll know instinctively during your performance how much work remains from how you feel as well as from how your audience reacts. I know this sounds like magical thinking, but you'll know what I mean when you try it.

IDENTIFYING WITH THE MAIN CHARACTER

Many novice writers identify with their protagonist, who just happens to share their age, gender, and outlook. They often write from within their protagonist's thoughts, feelings, and outlook. This works fine for literature, but not for cinema. The eyes and ears of film recording are those of an onlooker who can never enter another person's mind or know what they think or feel. The onlooker must *interpret* what each character feels and wants *from what they do or say*.

If you think about it, this is just like life; for we never enter another's reality except by imaginatively exercising our powers of observation. Writing for the screen is therefore an excellent discipline for any writer wanting to escape the egocentricity we bring along from early life when the world revolved around ourselves.

JUMP-STARTING THE IMAGINATION

Imagination, like an old car, does not work well from a cold start. It prefers getting a jump-start from examples and associations. From the early assignments you will see how writing flows naturally from observing life and

playing improvisation games. Quite quickly you will uncover your deeper interests. Through self-analysis exercises you will put together a notion of your artistic identity and see that it is unlike anyone else's. Gradually you will find your own version of the artistic process—that is, making things as you alone prefer to make them.

An important part of writing—one that far too many writers delay—is connecting with others. With today's computer resources, you can e-mail outlines to like-minded friends around the globe and get responses back in minutes. From such reactions, you get an early and vital experience of an audience reaction. This, the object and gratification of all artistic endeavor, is withheld for an unconscionably long time from the lone-wolf screenwriter.

THE ASSIGNMENTS

By using uncomplicated methods with clear demands, the assignments connect you with a spectrum of rich resources that await any writer. Even for the adaptation and documentary work, these will help you reach for ideas and approaches that are truly yours. Should you need information in greater depth, most chapters have a short bibliography at the end.

Concerning the Writing Samples

Accompanying the writing assignments are samples from a class of my former students. Each is a rapid sketch, so keep in mind that they are not ideals to be emulated. Just like your writing, they are seeds that invite nurture toward later stages of development. As they progress, dramatic principles emerge inside the context of the sample. Often there is a sidebar definition so you can relate definitions to examples. Later they are easy to find in context when you need a reminder.

As your critics apply the tools of dramatic analysis to your work, and as you apply the same tools to theirs, you will become adept at separating stories into component parts and finding alternative ways to reassemble them. This is an important skill when pushing each story toward its ultimate identity, effectiveness, balance, and thematic meaning.

HAVING FUN

The dominant mood while doing this work is one of excited enjoyment, especially when you are lucky enough to be part of a team or class. What can be more convivial than making vital discoveries together?

THIS BOOK'S LAYOUT AND GOALS

The book has six parts:

Part I: *Explanation* of the book's goals, approach to the creative process and overcoming writers' impediments.

Part II: *Observation, improvisation, and self-examination projects* to help you discover the marks you carry and develop a preliminary sketch of your creative identity (choice of twelve assignments).

Part III: *Tools of drama* to help you name and analyze the working parts of dramatic form and to develop any story element that is failing. Here is a kit of conceptual tools to help you develop characters, analyze a scene, assess a complete work, or test a story idea and its prevailing point of view. These critical and analytical tools will be useful no matter where you work in the future, or what you choose to do (choice of eight assignments).

Part IV: *Creative writing assignments* that start you writing in outline form. These encourage experiment with a range of resources such as autobiography, family tradition, dreams, myth, legend, news media, and short stories. Early assignments are aimed at outlines for short screen works, but keep in mind that ideas visualized for film make excellent foundations for other forms such as prose fiction, theater, or journalism. Succinct, effective short films are in great demand for festivals; they are also the fast track to securing longer and more demanding screenwriting work. In the later assignments, you work toward a full-length documentary subject and two pieces of original fiction. One is short screen fiction using a single point of view, and the other, a long-form feature film, asks for two points of view (choice of thirty-two assignments).

From Part IV onward, each chapter culminates in a bibliographical section called "Going Farther" for anyone needing more specialized information.

Part V: *Revisiting* your work to consolidate your direction and to see what other aspects of creative identity emerge after you have completed a body of work (choice of four assignments).

Part VI: *Expanding your work into its final form*: This discusses what you will need to expand your outline into a screenplay, documentary, stage play, or prose fiction piece. There is an outline of principles concerning dialogue, structural considerations, and character development for screenplays, most of which holds good for prose fiction, theater, or other forms.

If you do more than a quarter of the assignments in this book, you should by the end be able to generate a wide variety of personally felt stories without ever having to imitate or wait for inspiration.

GETTING STARTED

Whenever you write, remember to *first create freely, and only later analyze and rewrite*. At the beginning, use any and every writing method that lets you play freely as you write.

You can sit, stand, lie down, or float in the bath. Write at the computer, scribble in an exercise book, talk into a recorder, or mumble to your granny in a bar. Do whatever generates material and ideas. Your mind will only work freely if you let it off the leash of self-censorship.

Wear but one hat at a time, for you mustn't let your growing critical knowledge silence your instincts and personal voice. That means keeping author and critic roles firmly separated. Revel in the chaos that the improvising author produces; afterward there'll be plenty of time to move into editorial mode, to organize and refine what you have produced.

Feel free to read ahead, see where the work is leading, and what kinds of issue are coming up. Each chapter brings new work so you will sometimes need to make resource collections. If you want to start now, here's how:

Picture File: Save any pictures that appeal to you from magazines and newspapers. A powerful inspiration can come from a war photograph, a human interest portrait, a silly fashion ad, or a fabulous landscape.

Dream Journal: This is private, kept at home, and used for the Dream Sequence project. Keep a notebook by your bed and write down dreams as they occur. It's important when recalling a dream to lie still and not to move until you have reconstructed as much as possible. Often you will only have a fragment, but from quietly contemplating it and writing it down, another and another will return until you have a fairly complete record. You can train yourself to wake up and record a good dream by telling yourself before you go to sleep, "If I have a good dream, I'll wake up and write it down." Keep up the self-instruction nightly until it happens spontaneously.

News File: Save good news stories in a folder for use in the News Story and Documentary projects. For projects that do not depend on being current, go through old magazines and papers because there you'll find old material that no one else will think of using. A fantastic source of free newspapers and magazines is a recycling center, if they will let you rummage. Most fiction ideas start from actuality, and old actuality is as good as new.

Writer's Journal: Keep a small notebook with you at all times and record the thoughts, sights, or ideas that appeal to you. Recording the actual is your apprenticeship in observing life more closely and astutely. Making records and squirreling away whatever attracts your notice is a supremely writerly habit. It means that time spent

traveling, waiting around, eating, or even sleeping (if you dream) can always be turned to good account. If you are using this book in a class, your instructor may ask to see your Writer's Journal at set times during the course.

The Game called CLOSAT

Journal observations, your bank of ideas from which to write, will become playing cards for an instant story-making game called "CLOSAT." To speed retrieval, tag each item in the margin with one or more of these CLOSAT categories:

C = description of *Characters* who could be used in a story.
L = interesting and visual *Location*.
O = curious or evocative *Object*.
S = loaded or revealing *Situation*.
A = unusual or revealing *Act*.
T = any *Theme* that intrigues you or that you see embodied in life.

CLOSAT Definitions and Examples

C (*character*) is anyone whose appearance, mannerisms, occupation, or activities suggest potential for a character in a story. You might see somebody momentarily in the street and discover that their image persists afterward, or you might sit down to distill all you know about an acquaintance of many years. The characters you "collect" become your repertory cast. Their potential depends on what resonances you discover as you start working with them. You may decide they are major protagonists or only bit-part players. Some people will be unlike anyone you have ever seen before, but many will be types. A type description is good when it summons a smile of delighted recognition from listeners. The examples here are brief *thumbnail* descriptions.

Examples:

- Ruddy-faced factory maintenance man with a little pug dog as companion.
- Rapt little black girl with tongue out as she reads.
- Man and woman biker couple with identical gray ponytails.
- Woman whose yellow running outfit makes her look like a pantomime chicken.

L (*location*) is any place that suggests a setting for something to happen. Often characters and places go together, but it can be interesting to shake

things up and make your runaway urban teenager hide from the law in a smelly chicken farm, or your wan bank clerk prove himself on a doomed Russian trawler.

Examples:

- Harbor bridge with a single street lamp.
- Run-down stationery store.
- Attic room with a grubby, unmade bed.
- Country garage with yellowing pin-ups next to a rack of fan belts.

O (*object*) is any that is worth recording because it is eloquent of place, time, situation, or owners.

Examples:

- Pottery pig for storing cookies.
- Battered straw hat with red, white, and blue ribbon.
- Valentine card that plays a squeaky tune.
- Set of partially melted plastic soldiers.
- Woman's makeup kit left on a park bench.
- Pair of running shoes dangling by their laces from a dead tree branch.

S (*situation*) is a conjunction of circumstances or a predicament that puts its characters under some special pressure.

Examples:

- Being the poor guest of a wealthy family.
- Car breaking down at night in a scary neighborhood.
- Being x-rayed wearing a paper gown that gapes open at the back.
- Finding that one's neighbor in a packed cinema is an indigent person with an overpowering smell.
- A neighbor digging what looks like a human-sized grave in his yard.

A (*act*) is any human deed or action that seems freighted with meaning or potential.

Examples:

- Nearly having a driving accident, through distraction.
- Setting up an elaborate practical joke, then relenting.
- Running fully clothed into the sea.
- Avoiding a friend.
- Chopping firewood.
- Improvising a bed for the night.
- Drawing a lot of money from a cash machine.
- Maintaining a smile while being threatened.

T (*theme*) is the central or dominating idea, seldom stated directly, that underlies the subject of a story and that comments on it. If the subject of a

story is a homeless teenager, its theme might be "the importance of kindness to strangers."

Examples:

Breaking boundaries.
Revenge.
Love conquers all.
Jealousy.
Betrayal.
Sibling rivalry.
Guilt.
Atonement.
Forgiveness.

PLAYING CARDS

For the assignments in Chapter 5 you will need to move around and make some good CLOSAT observations on index cards. With them you'll play an improvisational game. Handwritten cards won't work for other people, so make them in the typed, standard format below. If it's easier to arrange, use gum to mount computer-printed material on index cards. Figure 1–1 is an example for a character called Ronnie. Because he's a character, he's coded C. More examples appear at the end of Chapter 3.

Your initials	Descriptive tag	Letter Code
P.P.R.	*Ronnie, Movie-Theater Manager*	C

Seventyish man with shock-white hair combed back in a sweep to cover his bald spot. Dressed in cheap suit pants and shirtsleeves, heavy wire-rim aviator glasses protecting his silver eyes. Swears like a sailor at the staff of the crumbling movie palace and laments the bygone days of Hollywood and black-and-white. Greets any patron over sixty-five with a smile, scowls at all others. Smokes and sucks on coffee incessantly.

Figure 1–1 A typical CLOSAT card, this one for a character.

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2

You and the Creative Process

THE JOURNEY OF THE SELF

Discovering the source of your stories, those you are best qualified to tell, means looking for causes and effects in your own life and grasping the nature of what you feel most deeply. This exploration is not quick, tidy, or efficient, nor does it ever end. But it regularly produces insights that make people more accessible and interesting—both the real people around you and the fictional ones you nurture into existence.

I found such a source for myself, and it came as a true "moment of vision." A while back I had to describe my life and film work for a degree program. Working on the capsule autobiography part, I wrote that "The twenty or so documentary films I have directed are all different, and have nothing in common." No sooner had I written this than I realized with a premonitory shock that exactly the opposite was true. All my documentaries explored the same theme—that of imprisonment and the will to break out of it. True, they had a wide range of subject matter and outcomes, but unknown to me this theme was there in all of them.

As my mind raced to explain this, the answer arose just as mysteriously. I saw how I had been marked—first as a lone middle-class boy in a hostile English village, then as the child of a foreigner. In schools, in my family, in an England besieged and at war, and then as a conscript in the military, I had always felt like the odd man out. All that time, feeling like a captive was so constant that it had failed to even register with me. How logical, then, to later make a string of films about captivity and breaking out!

Turning to students whose works I had helped midwife into being, I saw that each took a long time to gain possession of their artistic core. Only slowly and imperfectly do we grasp what drives us. Yet something within

must know all along. Because when you look back, you see you have steered a consistent course anyway.

The lesson from my discovery is that we can speed our progress by actively searching for how life has *marked* us. Working at any craft within our chosen art form always furthers this development, for as we dare to go closer to the core of our lives, we get better at our craft. And vice versa—the two are symbiotic.

WANTING TO TELL STORIES

Our need to tell stories arises, I think, from needing to explore the tensions we carry. Any new truth affords relief because we see a little better where we are, and why. Truth always liberates us, and always connects us with other souls treading the same road. Think of Dorothy hitching up with her three friends to follow the Yellow Brick Road. *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) is all about the part that courage plays in becoming fully alive. Frank Baum, who wrote the novel of the same name, understood this. His work, realized through the cinema, has reached untold millions.

SELF-EXPOSURE AND GIVING SUPPORT

To act on the self-discovery material in this book means taking chances. It means showing who you are to the people around you and trusting that it will lead somewhere. Delving into the raw material of your life in the sight of other people—something inevitable while you do this book's work—can be uncomfortable. But consider this: *You cannot excel as an artist and stay in hiding*. Conflict and insecurity on the Yellow Brick Road are as normal as breathing. Admitting to them and exploring them in stories is how writers use their fears and creative dissatisfaction to better comprehend the way things are. Explore like this, and you can turn an ordinary life into a noble quest.

In an idea development group, you become a natural leader if you are a risk taker. Your example will encourage even the shyest to show their cards. Having others listen and react to your work is vital to discovering and validating your future direction. Whenever you see anyone doing this, let them know you appreciate their courage. Good collaborators are generous souls who support anyone taking a risk.

WHAT IS THERAPY AND WHAT IS ART?

People sometimes assume that art and therapy are one and the same thing. Therapy, however, exists to reduce a person's pain to manageable

proportions and restore his appetite for living. When a person's emotional conflicts are so present and pressing that his daily living becomes a battle, he may have to put art-making aside and seek the help of a compassionate professional. Making art is not something you can or need to do if you are drowning.

That said, many people write from a deep impulse for salvation or change. I once interviewed Primo Levi, who worked in Italy most of his life as an industrial chemist. His *Survival in Auschwitz* (title in England, *If This Is a Man*) is the most restrained, compassionate, and clear-sighted account of life amid unimaginable cruelty in the Nazi death camps. He related how many people in the camps had the same dream—of somehow escaping, getting home, and of beginning to tell a loved one about what had happened to them. But as they spoke, the person turned away and left. Levi, anticipating this when he got home, sat down in his mother's house and wrote without stopping. He put his account away in a drawer without reading it for several years. "It put a diaphragm between me and the experience," he said. Later, once it saw the light of day, it became recognized as the classic account, a book about humanity itself that nobody ever forgets.

If you need therapy to survive, it is (and must be) self-directed. Art, however, is other directed, and people make it to grapple with the mysteries of human existence. It is a way to share with others the patterns, meanings, and mysteries of simply *what is*. Art sets out to explain, question, or celebrate what we feel most deeply, what we yearn for or protest against, so that making it is rooted in our most abiding preoccupations. It moves from inside you outward toward the universal, and along the way, of course, you change and grow—which is about as therapeutic as it gets. Levi in his twenties set out to relieve the terrible pressure he carried by setting down his experiences. But his book ended up evoking the human spirit in all its manifestations when under extreme duress.

WHAT STORIES MEAN

When you make stories, your work cannot stop at showing what is typical and plain for all to see. That, after all, is what a household mirror does. Somehow you must find what you in particular can see, what you alone perhaps can make visible to others. "Art," said the French realist writer Émile Zola, "is a corner of nature seen through a temperament." By deliberately seeing through your own vivid and particular intelligence, you give us the causes, effects, injustices, and beauty of a world that nobody else has seen in quite your way. You alone can discover how to do that, and you get there by systematically rejecting whatever you produce that is facile, common, and ordinary. The artistic process is about rejecting and improving what you're making until you feel you have finally gotten to the real McCoy.

Whether you make fiction or documentary, you will need to have provocative ideas about the corners of nature that draw you. In the documentaries I have done, there is a typical craft cycle in which ideas take shape. It begins with the same research that fiction writers undertake. Gaining entry to a particular world inhabited by particular people living actual situations is sometimes easy, sometimes difficult. As trust grows and as people begin to let you see their lives, clues come as to what "the story" may really be. Clues lead to discoveries, discoveries lead to breakthroughs, and breakthroughs are what ultimately reward you with the larger ideas and insights. Again and again, your discoveries depend on some concurring note in yourself, a growing capacity to recognize what is true. It comes from deeply considering another person and seeing his or her dilemmas as if they were your own. When you really try, you almost *become* that person, and it's like falling in love.

Your piece keeps growing and changing, an evolutionary tiger that never slows and that you ride throughout filming and editing. All the time you are fighting to impose more clarity, more cause-and-effect, and more dramatic meaning on the world in your film.

Documentary is a branch of drama—one that happens to draw on a ready-made world rather than an invented one. Fiction is not so different. Instead of documentary footage you make your story from your bank of memories and experience. In any form of storytelling you aspire to allow your audience to experience very strong feelings, and through that you hope to illuminate what it means at special moments to be truly human.

At the end of one story is the beginning of another. Creating a new story always begins with the questions that still need answering. The larger the questions, the nobler the work. Why else would people still want to see the works of an Elizabethan glovemaker's son called William Shakespeare?

THEME AND VARIATION

Artists with a body of successful and expressive work quite often have only one or two deeply felt themes in all their work. This doesn't leave them limited, for a strong theme, like a powerful melody, liberates a writer to explore the universe of variations that arise from it.

JUST DO IT

Genius is almost never conferred at birth and waiting to be liberated. Mostly it comes from working very hard at what you like. The London artist and teacher Peter Baer believed that anyone could become a decent painter by simply working at painting for twenty years. Writers all say something similar—that you become a good writer by working hard at

writing. The "just do it" approach brings rewards no matter what kind of work you do. Your strongest, most communicative stories will always come when you struggle and risk writing about *what is*, those gnawing inner questions that you can neither answer nor send away. Embrace your path and those of your characters, whether they are good, bad, or indifferent, and you will always stumble upon the unexpected.

OUTLINE AND EXPANSION

The work in this book takes you high and fast over a lot of terrain. It never asks you to polish or rework a piece. That comes later, when you make the decision to move beyond the ideation stage and expand the outline into something more finished. Although that process mostly lies beyond the scope of this book, bear in mind that a work's final form also takes many drafts. Writing is really rewriting. The book's last chapters will help you do this.

COLLABORATION

Any aspiring screenwriter or director must have a strong sense of identity or risk being shaken loose at important moments. Filmmaking is a collaborative activity, so you must sometimes withstand extreme social pressures. Either you defend your viewpoint tenaciously or see your prerogatives plucked away by strong-willed colleagues, actors, and crew members. Know what you believe, and even though they curse you, they'll respect you for standing your ground.

> *Collaborating* with other people is a wonderfully social and energizing way to make something. Plays were once produced as a collaborative effort, and for hundreds of years there were no directors in the theater. The cinema owes its high significance to the fact that it is made by an artistic collective.

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PART II

SELF-EXAMINATION, OBSERVATION, AND IMPROVISATION ASSIGNMENTS

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3

Artistic Identity

As a storyteller, your goal is to act on an audience. You do this by using what you strongly feel, by being provocative and trying to make people think and feel in unfamiliar ways. First, of course, you must do all this yourself. Anyone producing significant work in the arts must therefore have a willingness to confront their own issues and the energy to exploit an art form and turn it into a tool of inquiry. Your tastes will guide you toward your proper area of activity. You may, for instance, be drawn to exploring the terrors and imagination of childhood, like M. Night Shyamalan in *The Sixth Sense* (1999), or you may have a penchant for playful and deadly political humor like Michael Moore in *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004). Finding your own direction takes curiosity, a hunger to make sense of things, and a need to resolve the psychic marks and wounds left by key experiences. This is your *unfinished business*, a bundle of mysterious proclivities that we shall call your *artistic identity*.

> *Artistic identity* is the source of creativity that you carry within. Shaped by temperament and biographical circumstances, it is the inner force powering your search for answers to the "unfinished business" in your life.

Trying to make stories that audiences will find fulfilling is very rewarding, and doing the spadework will profoundly influence your journey through life. This is because opening the doors of memory and experience spontaneously alters your future actions and choices. By growing and changing, you gain a larger vision and have more to contribute.

The first steps concern looking reality in the eye, for as an aspiring storyteller you need to confront whatever has formed you. Expect to feel excited rather than threatened by the work that follows. Sharing this is

liberating, but running the gauntlet can occasionally be embarrassing, since everyone has privacy issues. So let's say it loud and clear: Nobody has the right to invade your privacy. It's always your decision which doors you open, and when and to whom you open them. Fiction in any case is the camouflage under which determined people get past their own taboos. What matters most is finding words to capture the exact flavor of an experience, to light up some aspect of the human condition as you know it. When you get it right, your audience will immediately recognize it and be moved.

Sometimes an irony will emerge as you search for what or who has most touched you. Some are negative events or hated personalities, yet they turn out to have been the crucibles for your keenest insights and discoveries. Old enemies and troublesome scars turn out to be friends in disguise. Where would you be without them? Human truth contains both light and dark. Ironically the "negative" is quite as important to understanding as is the "positive," because in the end there are no good or bad human truths. Truth is truth, and all verity is complex, contradictory, and interdependent. Nothing human is alien to me, said the Roman poet Terence (c. 195–159 B.C.).

> Uncovering your own *themes* and *artistic identity* helps you identify the inner forces insisting that you resolve unfinished business. A way to answer this challenge is to make fictional tales that deeply explore the essentials. If they truly satisfy you, they will connect with others.

Let's turn to the assignments. First are some private exercises to help you profile your creative identity. This, once you have an idea of it, will seem rather hypothetical. But as you sojourn through the book's work, and as you stockpile narrative ideas, a more solid and rooted picture of your creative drives and strengths will emerge. Recognizing where you belong, emotionally and ideologically, will help you focus on areas that hold the greatest prospect for discovery and growth. Following the grain of your deepest interests, your work will become more secure and authoritative.

DISPLACEMENT

Because fiction authors must often protect their sources' privacy, they *displace* their interests and concerns by altering whatever would identify real-life sources. This may include the names of places, people, or institutions; the time period; and even the protagonists' gender. Authors most often displace their own experiences to avoid being "typecast" by readers. A writer needs the freedom to experiment with roles, not to become identified with one.

> *Displacing* your underlying concerns into other areas of life lets you avoid the quicksands of autobiography. Using fresh characters and fresh circumstances lets you explore underlying truths and your relationship to them.

Using the fictional process lets you amalgamate individuals from actuality and make a more embracing type; indeed you can take any liberty providing your audience sees credible characters in a credible world. Your new creation can be more true, more universally representative than its original. This is why documentary makers, frustrated by what they cannot put on the screen, sometimes turn to fiction. Michael Apted's *Incident at Oglala* (1992) is a documentary that questions the justice of putting the Native American leader Leonard Peltier behind bars. *Thunderheart* (1992), Apted's film that followed, is a fictional treatment proposing how the FBI handled the events that led to someone like Peltier being blamed for the deaths of two FBI agents. Both films are set in the same world and look at the same problems, but use different and complementary strategies to get at intractable truths.

ASSIGNMENTS

Assignment 3-1: Survey of Yourself and Your Authorial Goals

You are going to make an oral presentation about yourself and your authorial goals.

Assignment 3-1 is the private work you do to prepare for the brief oral presentation in Assignment 3-2 that follows, so you'll need some initial fiction ideas that you can summarize. Who or what you speak about can be shielded by displacement—that is, by disguising the identity of anyone to whom you might feel disloyal or defamatory. For your preparation explore in brief, private notes:

> The marks left on you by one or two really formative experiences. Keep description of the root experiences minimal and concentrate instead on their outcome.

1. Develop two or three *themes* connected with the marks that this main character carries.

   Examples: Isolation; betrayal; the high cost of pretence.

2. Think of three or four *types of character toward whom you feel particular empathy*. These can be based on people you still know, people no longer alive or in your life, or characters in fiction with whom you strongly resonate. Make them as different as possible.

Examples:

- Men who have trouble with women and intimacy.
- A friend who evades loneliness by putting all his energies into the environmental protest movement.
- An older woman battling a boss who wants to replace her with a younger woman.
- People who drift into crisis through denying what they feel.
- Loners who construct self-contained worlds.
- People who instinctively distrust authorities.
- Anyone searching for something or someone they have lost.
- Michael Henchard (the laborer who got drunk and auctioned his wife and child in Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*).

3. Develop four *provisional story topics*. Make all four exploit a single theme from your answer to #1, and make each topic,
   a. Have one main character.
   b. Explore concerns you care about.
   c. Be as different from each other as possible.

Examples: (exploring the theme of "the high cost of pretence")

- A tough soldier who fears that his validity in his platoon depends on keeping hidden the fact that he is gay.
- A former nun who finds that her temporary work agency has put her in a dating service (comedy?).
- An innocent young nurse, sent to a battle zone, pretending cheerful optimism among desperately ill and dying soldiers, and beginning to question the patriotism that sent them all there.
- An embattled high school coach, whose team keeps losing, faces a power grab by a popular assistant.
- A second wife, facing the fact that her husband's possessive teenage daughter is coming to live with them, must redefine her role if domestic life is to remain bearable (another potential comedy).

Assignment 3-2: Presenting Yourself and Your Storytelling Goals

Using the six prompts below, develop at least two examples for each and make skeletal notes for a 4-minute oral presentation. Rehearse your presentation several times, timing each attempt. Most important is to relate how you mean to *act upon* your audience. If you speak from reminder notes, be sure to periodically look your audience in the eye and address them directly. This should be a lively oral presentation, not a dry reading.

1. *Peculiarities* of my life that have made me see with special eyes are . . .
2. *Conflicts* formative in my life are . . .
3. *Themes* that I'd like to work with are . . .
4. *Types of character I empathize with* are . . .
5. *Story topics* I'd like to explore are . . .
6. *Ways I'd like to act on my audience* are . . .

Assignment 3-3 Listening and Reacting

Listen to other people's presentations as supportively and nonjudgmentally as you can, because the presenter feels exposed and vulnerable. Even if you detect self-defense or self-promotion, try to absorb and commit to memory all that the person says. Look for,

- Moments in the presentation that moved you.
- Moments of discomfort—yours, or the writer's. What might be at stake there?
- Connections inside the presentation that the writer may not have seen.
- Whatever you learn about the writer that is new and interesting.
- Consistency or connection between the writer's choices of,
    - Formative experience and chosen themes.
    - Character types and what else interests the writer.
    - Story type and chosen themes and characters.
    - Preferred work and what else he/she has said.

When you react, limit your discussion to what is constructive. This is a time to build confidence in other people, not risk tearing it down.

GOING FARTHER

Works about the artistic process as writers, artists, filmmakers, and choreographers experience it:

Bayles, David, and Ted Orland. *Art & Fear: Observations on the Perils (and Rewards) of Artmaking*. Image Continuum Press, 2001. (Although geared to graphic art, this book deals with common misconceptions about art in general, and with removing the obstacles that stop people making it.)

Cameron, Julia. *The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity*, 10th ed. Tarcher, 2002. (Highly prescriptive and addressed to those suffering "blocks, limiting beliefs, fear, self-sabotage, jealousy, guilt, addictions, and other inhibiting forces.")

Cameron, Julia, and Judy Collins. *Walking in This World: The Practical Art of Creativity*. Tarcher, 2003. (Further material if you liked *The Artist's Way*.)

Dannenbaum, Jed, Carroll Hodge, and Doe Mayer. *Creative Filmmaking from the Inside Out: Five Keys to the Art of Making Inspired Movies and Television*. Simon & Schuster, 2003. (Particularly good on the embedded ethics and values that impel unaware writers make drug smugglers Mexican, maids black, and stockbrokers always at the wheel of a BMW. How, in short, to minimize inbuilt messages of social and ethical bias.)

Lamott, Ann. *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. Knopf, 1995. (Funny and engagingly personal description of the stages a writer must go through, and of the wracking neuroses suffered by so many.)

Tharp, Twyla. *The Creative Habit: Learn It and Use It for Life*. Simon & Schuster, 2005. (The famous choreographer shares a lifetime of discoveries about how to prepare for, maintain, and deliver on one's creative potential. Directly and personably written, and applicable to any difficult endeavor in life).

4

Introductions and Playing CLOSAT

IMPROVISING

Sheherazade in the *Thousand and One Nights* saves her life by delighting the king with a different tale every night. She does not tell him (or us) how she keeps going, but her ability to improvise stories makes her indispensable to the king's happiness.

> *Improvisation* is translation of our unconsciously stored experience into action. It happens best under some special pressure and when we choose to risk trusting it.

Likewise, some actors, comedians, and performance artists can fascinate us with their quick-witted talent for invention. In Chicago where I live there is Second City, a theater school where would-be comedians practice until they can make up scenes on the spot from any and all variables. From any chance situation yelled out by an audience, they create something meaningful—and have enormous fun doing it. Some alumni have become very famous.[1]

We think of this as a talent, but in fact anybody can learn to do it. Think back to an occasion when your friends howled with laughter because for some reason you became effortlessly funny. Another time, just as mysteriously, your mind suddenly solved some intractable problem all on its own and you realized that sometimes, special things happen. It's like a kite

1. To name just a few: Mike Nichols, Elaine May, Alan Arkin, Joan Rivers, Harold Ramis, John Belushi, Dan Aykroyd, Bill Murray, John Candy, Martin Short, Gilda Radner, Jim Belushi, and Mike Myers.

suddenly taking off, the near-perfect working of your unconsciously stored experience emerging under the right kind of pressures.

This is your intuitive self, your native aptitude at work. But that fluid intelligence is as perverse as a donkey; try to strong-arm it into delivering, and it digs in its heels and refuses. It works only when you can relax and trust it to work. There are no advance guarantees. The optimal conditions seem to be that you,

- Confront a situation of risk that you may or may not overcome.
- Plunge into action without plans or forethought.
- Know that if you stop to think, you are sunk. So you don't.
- Stay in the moment and trust your intuition to make good choices. It does.

People who play fast sports know this ability is vital to winning. Players in top form can simultaneously relax, act on intuition, and perform extraordinary feats. Being watched by spectators can even intensify their focus. However, when players get rattled and lose their nerve, you see it immediately. They are like construction workers: If one falls from the steelwork, others lose confidence and follow.

MAINTAINING FOCUS

Paradoxically, you maintain focus by abandoning everything that ensures against risk. To stay focused, you must stay in the here-and-now, says the great acting teacher Konstantin Stanislavsky. Never look ahead at where you are going or back at where you have been. Never allow your ego to start judging how well you are doing, for then you become a divided being: One part tries to go on playing your character, another part subjects you to the imagined scrutiny of the onlookers. You become painfully self-conscious, self-judging, and dysfunctional. Everyone knows this utterly disabling condition from youth.

For a writer, improvising is a valuable skill. Becoming at ease with anyone around, taking risks, and elaborating ideas on the spot takes a headlong trust that you will emerge undamaged. And of course with some practice you mostly do. Even the occasional spill lets you come out less afraid.

Practice improvisation in daily life by making yourself act on each new situation with something spontaneous and a little unexpected, something you make up on the spot. This is your practice for composing and presenting stories.

PITCHING

To pitch a story idea means to orally present its essentials in just a few minutes. Your task is to move a trial audience with the story's attractions and purpose, and to make them long to see the full version. Being a salesperson for yourself takes some getting used to, but it's important that you break down the walls of shyness if you are to show what you have inside. Communicating your ideas does not require you to become showy and egotistical. It means shucking your phobias and remaining the same simple, direct person that you intrinsically are in front of different audiences.

After introducing yourself, you will get some initial practice at improvising a CLOSAT scene by using some of the twelve ready-made sample cards at the end of this chapter. You'll need photocopies of these ready to draw from a hat.

> A *scene* is an episode or a sequence of events that usually takes place in one locale or during one stretch of time.

As you pitch a scene, you'll quickly sense whether your audience is warm or cool, and whether they are taking to your idea. A warm audience extends an indefinable glow, while a cool audience holds back and challenges you to draw them out.

When you are part of an audience yourself, support the person giving the presentation by paying undivided attention and signaling appreciation for any risks they take. In jazz concerts, the audience applauds when something special takes place—an exchange between the players perhaps, or an inventive solo. In pitching sessions the audience cannot be so expressive, so their support is more implied. Whether you give or receive support, you'll feel something take place nonetheless. Under optimal conditions, speaker and listener become an ensemble, and the whole is joyously greater than its parts.

If You Are Working Alone

If you are using this book on your own, you will need to find people to whom you can pitch your ideas. Assignments can be done either alone or as part of a group or class, but the more people you can find to work with, the richer the follow-up discussions. It's especially fascinating to see how differently each person or group reacts to a similar pitch, and what a broad spectrum of possibility emerges. Stories are living, growing, changing organisms whose medium is the audience.

ASSIGNMENTS

Assignment 4-1: Five-minute Self-introduction

a. *Introduce yourself* in five minutes or less by giving your name, background, and what personal interests, obstacles, or difficulties have led you to be interested in developing story ideas.
b. *Say what work specially attracts you* (such as short story writing, documentaries, electronic or website journalism, or writing feature films) and why.

Assignment 4-2: Play the CLOSAT Game

Without vetting the card contents, randomly withdraw cards from the hat until you have one location, one object, and two characters. Taking no more than ten minutes, improvise a scene that brings these three elements together. This will work a little differently depending on whether you are working alone or in a group.

a. *Individuals:* Pitch the story to your chosen audience. Your auditors can give you a new choice of cards so you get practice at developing several scenes, or you can invite them to enjoy the game by improvising scenes from cards you deal them.
b. *Class/Groups:* Divide into groups of three or four persons, choose one person to take notes, then put your heads together and improvise while the secretary keeps notes. The group secretary gives the pitch, describing the scene that his or her group invented from the common ingredients.

Improvising scenes under the gun is a lot of fun, and shows how wildly different and imaginative the stories can become after they develop from a common starting point.

Discussion

- What elements of the presentations were most effective?
- What tellings could you most clearly see in your mind's eye?
- What seemed a particularly ingenious and effective use of the "givens"? (See sidebar.)
- Which pitch did you most like, and why?

> The *givens* of a scene are the who, what, when, and where that frame the action and determine aspects of the scene's content.

Assignment 4-3: Develop Your Own Pitching Guidelines

Based on the experience you just had as an audience member and/or as presenter, take 15–20 minutes to sketch out the guidelines you'd give to anyone making their first pitch. Try working from these prompts:

- What makes a story effective for the listener?
- What would help a presenter get the story essentials across quickly?
- What kind of critical feedback is helpful for the writer after his/her pitch?
- What is less helpful and to be avoided?

Discussion of guidelines

- What differences in criteria did people develop?
- Where did people agree?
- What main ideas and principles do you think could stand as an overall statement?
- Did the guidelines include,
    - Presenter's manner or pacing?
    - The way time was used?
    - How the pitch was structured?
    - Ideas for the etiquette of criticism?
    - What feedback tends to de-energize and discourage the presenter from doing further work, and should be avoided?
    - What feedback sends a presenter back enthusiastically to do more work?

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Explore any or all of the following:

1. In which stories did the characters come alive, and why?
2. Which stories had some kind of conflict—that is, something for the main character to push against?
3. Did anyone in any story change or grow?
4. Which stories were brought to a satisfactory conclusion, or "resolution"? (See sidebar.)
5. Which stories or parts of stories were fresh and managed to avoid stereotypes?
6. Which story most left you wondering, "What will happen next?"

Conflict, the struggle between opposing forces, determines the action in a drama. *External conflict* exists when the struggle is between characters or between a character and natural law or fate. *Internal conflict* exists when a character experiences a struggle within.

The *resolution* to a dramatic situation is whatever action concludes and resolves the situation's conflict.

Getting help from other people as you critique, solve problems, and formulate working principles is important because it's like exploring an audience for its values. Working collaboratively runs absolutely counter to the myth that real art comes only from the isolated and suffering individualist. Until the Middle Ages or later, all theater was made by a team, as films are today. Contemporary comedy is usually written by writer teams, not individuals.

If your ambition is to entertain large audiences, you must begin seeking audience responses to your ideas. You'll soon see how much wisdom, balance, and good sense exists in a group, particularly after you have all become comfortable with each other. Though developing ideas through discussion is slow, each person contributes, and by stretching his or her mind everyone gains practice at becoming a proficient dramatist. Unlike lectures and lessons, you never forget something that you helped to invent.

Characters

MGH *Rita, Destressed Yogi* C

Beside her constant stretching and movement, this fortyish woman wears the stress and discomfort of a week's trouble upon her brow. Her smooth, black Lycra body suit and deep purple sweater contrast with the sagging lines of her forlorn face. Her gestures are graceful but vain.

SNW *Uncle James* C

Has half an index finger. Holds his vodka bottle with pride and is rejuvenated by the first sip. Walks with a slight stagger. Most people know him. Some wave. Couldn't care less about others' perceptions of him. Has insightful conversations and is reliable for a good laugh. A tattered survivor living mostly in the streets. Needs a hug on occasion. Lonely eyes.

Figure 4–1 Cards for Playing CLOSAT.

AJM *Kid with Dinosaur (Obsession)* C

Restless boy of nine. When not thumbing through books on paleontology, he hunts in the backyard for dinosaur bones or any other clue the giant lizards may have left behind. Keeps a docile iguana named Spike near him most of the time, usually on his shoulder. His parents have nearly given up hope on their son and his all-consuming passion.

BAB *Leonardo Zaccanti, Mob Boss* C

Huge, obese fifty-six-year-old man in a white suit. Often sits in an ugly relic of a chair from the seventies, smoking a cigar. Likes to click through the TV stations looking for something good, like Miami Vice. Laughs at witty things he says to himself in Italian.

Objects

ACG *A Postcard* O

Fresh and new, with no postage and no date. On the front is a Confederate flag, and the back reads, "Keys are with Jay." There is no postmark or return address.

Figure 4–1 (cont'd) Cards for Playing CLOSAT.

MGA *Somebody's Black Glove* O

Black leather, dulled from harsh conditions, lying lonely in the gutter. Thumb and forefinger worn so low that barely a translucent skin has survived. Charcoal ashes coat the crevices between the fingers; the smell of peanut butter emanates from the whole glove.

PPR *Dancing Clown* O

The small, primary-colored box rests quietly on the counter top, one side open like a diorama. Inside is a garishly smiling clown with elastic limbs frozen in a jig, his arms and legs bent unnaturally. Later the box will be wound, and he will be summoned to perform, jerking spasmodically.

KDL *Arizona Dream Poster* O

A big poster titled "Arizona Dream." In the center is a big fish flying up into the sky. At the right upper side we see the moon, and behind the fish is a huge cactus, standing in the vast, spreading desert.

Figure 4–1 (cont'd) Cards for Playing CLOSAT.

Locations

MH *Freight Elevator* L

A freight elevator, the kind only used for moving large things, in an old tea factory. Two sides are not enclosed. It is a platform that rises through space . . . grey, cold. You can see great black cables all the way to the top, where they melt into darkness. Precarious-sounding groans are heard in the darkness as the grey floors go by.

JP *Narrow Walkway* L

A narrow walkway between a park that is next to a river on one side and, on the other, a four-lane highway filled with speeding cars. Newspapers and plastic bags are flying in the strong wind made by the cars. There are a few thin trees, which don't have any leaves. No one is in the park.

TGO *The Uncrowded Restaurant* L

The walls are all painted a very light pink. There is only one huge window, which shows all the cabs driving on Third Avenue. Long, thin mirrors cover the other wall. The waiters, all wearing black vests and white shirts, sit at the table nearest the kitchen. They look bored. The sound of the street is all that can be heard.

Figure 4–1 (cont'd) Cards for Playing CLOSAT.

MFA *A Shack* L

A green meadow, then the lush foliage of trees and flowers of many colors. A crystal blue stream runs alongside the road, which has become a narrow cobblestone path. Behind ten feet of dirt, a shack composed of trashed wood panels and rusty nails stands proud. Classical music comes from within the shack.

Figure 4–1 (cont'd) Cards for Playing CLOSAT.

5

Autobiography and Influences

Exploring the marks left in you by your life is the key to what this book asks. It would still be the same if you were a comedian, screenwriter, novelist, poet, painter, actor, songwriter, or muralist: You would need to know what your issues are and where your emotions and imagination are most in flux. This is central for anyone wanting to truly entertain an audience. It should lead not to navel gazing but rather to recognizing what kinds of person and predicament you most understand and feel for.

This chapter contains work to help you go deeper with a self-profile. With its help you can distinguish the specific marks left on you by the life you have lived, and recognize those who have left a special impact. We acquire important parts of ourselves because of special people, and these can have their existence in fiction as well as actuality. Some you will know well, others may be a surprise. Each key person helps us discover a hidden aspect of ourselves and thus to fulfill more of our innate potential.

You will not be asked to write more than a fragment of autobiography, and this will be from childhood. Autobiography of your more recent life is risky and hard to write because it always attracts such thickets of distortions and omissions. We have so many reasons to view our own lives selectively in the distorting mirror of memory and self-justification. The reader, of course, is perfectly aware of this and on guard.

Yet what we have seen and felt, what has happened to or near us, is literally our experience of the world. It is important to recognize and make use of the special authority that your core experience confers. Every time you really explore its meanings, your work is apt to become charged, authentic, and fascinating. You become specially endowed as if radioactive by whatever grips at your heart—whether it's love, friendship, fear, betrayal, or cruelty. Indeed we may be capable of full empathy only with those like ourselves. Imagining the reality of those unlike us is the work of a lifetime.

ASSIGNMENTS

Assignment 5-1: Autobiographical Survey

Whatever emerges from this survey is for your private use only. From the following reminders, make brief notes of anything leaving a strong mark on you—whether good or bad—and that seems relevant to your development as a person. Don't feel that you have to answer every question; deal only with what elicits significant information.

1. *Beginnings:* Year and place you were born, special circumstances and conditions, special religious or social conditions, your parents and any unusual circumstances.
2. *Health:* Special events, accidents, diseases, health circumstances.
3. *Early influences:* Special friends, visitors, neighbors, local characters.
4. *Relations:* Any siblings, cousins, grandparents, uncles, aunts who played a special role in your life.
5. *School:* Schools you attended, special courses, influential teachers, special events or traumas, special friendships or antipathies.
6. *Special activities:* Jobs, tasks at home, membership in group activities or sports.
7. *Journeys:* Memorable travels, holidays, migrations, escapes, or quests by your family or yourself.
8. *Adolescence:* For most people this is a war zone. What was most at stake for you?
9. *Major conflicts:* What have been the major conflicts in your life?
10. *People you have loved:* These can be family members, your first love, or those you fell in love with subsequently. What did you learn?
11. *People you have hated:* People for whom you've had a strong aversion. When was it, and why? What did you learn?
12. *Work:* Work you trained for or were made to do.
13. *Avocations:* Work that you wanted to do, such as hobbies, crafts, special interests.
14. *Arts:* Special experience or influences that turned you on to the arts—music, movies, plays, books, poetry, authors, movie directors, etc.
15. *Beliefs:* Religious or philosophical ideas or believers that influenced your path.
16. *Celebrations:* Any memorable special events, festivals, or reunions.
17. *Life's lessons:* Experiences, whether troubling or uplifting, that have deeply marked you and have altered your direction.
18. *Future:* Plans, hopes, and fears that you have at the moment.

Keep your answers in mind as you do the next assignment.

Assignment 5-2: Presenting Your Influences

The previous assignment was confidential, but this one leads to an oral presentation. Less obvious strands in your creative identity will emerge when you identify characters with whom you resonate. One person near the top of my list would be a nurse I met while making a documentary about volunteers in the Spanish Civil War. Faced with a corridor of seriously wounded soldiers, she had to choose who would get attention from the only surgeon. Though very young, she suddenly faced tragic responsibilities and lost her youth at a stroke. Thirty years later she wept when speaking about it because she could never feel assured that she had made the right choices.

The goal here is to supplement what you learned from the previous assignment.

1. List four *characters* from literature, cinema, or theater with whom you feel a kinship. That affinity can be hero worship, but it becomes more interesting when your response is to darker or more complex qualities. Arrange them by their importance to you.
2. Do the same for four *public figures*, such as actors, artists, politicians, sports or historical figures.
3. Make a short or long list of *people known to you* who have made an impact on you. Include those having bad influences as well as those whose mark was good—but leave out immediate family members, as they usually overcomplicate the exercise.

Presentation Speak for no more than five minutes, describing your top person in each of 1, 2, and 3 above. Focus on the particular qualities in them to which you resonate.

Discussion Adapt these questions depending on how large or small the discussion group proves to be.

1. What emerged as common themes?
2. Did some themes seem specific to the speakers' gender?
3. What stays in your memory as special and unusual?
4. Whom did you find yourself admiring for his or her frankness, and what did this person (or people) say that particularly impressed you?
5. Whom did you feel you came to know best from their presentation?

The aim in the next three chapters is to help you make the most of your strengths by uncovering how your life, tastes, and feelings have equipped you to be a writer.

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6

Observing from Life

Becoming a successful writer, actor, comedian, painter, or photographer takes acute observational skills. By looking around rather intently, you can develop the ability to see a profusion of extraordinary things. Because your life has endowed you with a special identity, you tend to notice particular things in particular ways, and to assign them particular meanings. But no highly individual view of the world will emerge until you begin working to develop your potential. That's what this chapter is about. It shows how the sensitivities you explored in the previous, autobiographical chapter give you a particular view of the teeming activities in the world around you.

You develop your abilities by making yourself hyperconscious. This begins to happen whenever you set about making a record. Take a camera into a large store at Christmas and you'll ask yourself, "What picture shall I take?" You have to decide what pictures are possible, what is really happening, and what is really worth recording. Stand in the same place with a notebook, and similar questions arise. What is going on? How do I describe it, and what meaning does it suggest? The writer David Sedaris, who once took a job as a Christmas elf in Macy's, gave an unforgettably dark, caustic, and screamingly funny account of New Yorkers trundling their brats through toyland.[1] How Sedaris sees is a direct outcome of his bizarre upbringing in a deeply eccentric family.

From your sharpest observation of whatever is odd, funny, strange, or ambiguous in that surreal profusion called reality, you can find patterns and then narratives. To explore how easily good observations can become stories, we're going to play the CLOSAT game. Its title, as

1. See "SantaLand Diaries" in National Public Radio archives, 1994 at www.npr.org.

you will recall from Chapter 1, is an acronym based on categories of observation:

C = descriptions of a *Character* who could be used in a story.
L = interesting and visual *Location*.
O = curious or evocative *Object*.
S = loaded or revealing *Situation*.
A = unusual or revealing *Act*.
T = any *Theme* that intrigues you or that you see embodied in life.

The game's value is that you'll learn:

- To see your intuition at work and to trust its abilities.
- How to sketch fast. Sketching is valuable to writers as well as to graphic artists.
- That every story comes with problems that invite solving.
- That each story suggests its own form, and that this can be usefully discussed.
- That each story can be extended.

If you work in a group or class,

- Hearing their stories is the very best way of getting to know the others.
- You come to recognize and appreciate how each person's mind works.
- You see how effortlessly a group can produce and synthesize ideas.

ASSIGNMENTS

Assignment 6-1: CLOSAT Preparatory Work and the Writer's Journal

Some preparation is necessary, so if you haven't started yet, look intensively around you and *make notes on characters, locations, objects, situations, acts, and themes* in a pocket-sized notebook, as outlined in Chapter 1, "Preparations." Keep your writer's journal with you at all times so you can record appealing thoughts, sights, or ideas before they vaporize. Tag descriptions help you retrieve items later.

From your writer's notebook *make six* CLOSAT *playing cards*, two each for Characters, Locations, and Objects. If you are working alone, make more. Reduce your observations to the most telling detail, and remember to code each card at the top with your initials, a tag line, and its CLOSAT type, like the sample cards in Chapter 4. You are going to practice fabricating stories with the least preconception or preparation.

Assignment 6-2: Play CLOSAT with Two Characters, One Location, and One Object

If you are working alone:

1. Make piles of cards, one each for characters, locations, and objects. Shuffle them and lay them facedown.
2. Take two cards from the Character pile and one each from the Location and Object piles.
3. Play CLOSAT, taking only ten minutes before presenting the result.

If you are part of a group/class:

1. Divide into groups, each pooling its cards as heaps of characters, locations, and objects. Designate a different group secretary so the position rotates.
2. Exchange piles facedown so each group works blind with another group's cards.
3. Someone draws two cards from the Character pile and one each from the Location and Object piles.
4. The group reads what it has drawn and plays CLOSAT, putting heads together for ten minutes only before the group secretaries present each group's work. If the group generates surplus or contradictory material, the secretary improvises the best possible telling.

It will be a delight to learn what the storyteller, or the group, managed to do with a roll of worn-out orange shag carpeting, a shy young woman gospel singer, and a postal truck driver with his leg in a cast—*and* it must all happen on a mountain footpath in the early morning mist!

Assignment 6-3: CLOSAT with Three Characters, Two Objects, an Act, and a Theme

Play another round of CLOSAT, this time using three new characters, two new objects, an act, and a theme. This story will have two scenes.

Discussion So long as these issues get discussed, their order isn't important.

- We generally recall best what most engages us. Which group's story stands out in memory? You may want to concentrate on analyzing this story alone.
- Of the characters, which did you feel you know best, and why? (A little highly selective information can mean more than a lot of bland detail.)
- Which story seemed the strongest, and why?

- Which story had the most satisfying development, and what was its nature? (Don't be too critical of the rapidly improvised fragments you produced today, but you probably saw that characters who stay in an unchanging situation are not dramatically satisfying. They are credible but not interesting.)

> *Memory* effortlessly winnows out the best elements from any mass of story materials, discarding all else. Let your memory help you edit.

- What made a character more compelling? (Usually it's because that character was active, had an agenda of some kind, and was *trying to get, do, or accomplish* something.)
- How functional was the location? (Novice writers often let human interactions take place without regard to their settings. But the mood and meaning of a setting can powerfully affect us; it can suggest or limit action in useful ways, and make us more feel more connected to the protagonist's situation.)
- Decide who the main character is for each story and who is the "point of view" (POV) character. In most narrative forms there is usually a main character or characters through whose experiences we perceive the events. This is usually the person having the most potential to learn and grow. In your early drafts it will often be unclear who the main character is—or should be. Even when this becomes clear, the audience's perceptions and feelings may be routed, partly or wholly, through the perceptions of minor characters. Point of view, whether single or multiple, is an important aspect of storytelling and will often concern us.

> A *point of view (POV) character* is one whose experiences, feelings, or attitudes mainly shape our perception of the scene. POV can be routed through minor characters for dramatic effect or convenience. Some most interesting POV characters, such as the despised Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*, are made unreliable through a subjectivity brought about by anger, youth, or other perceptual handicaps.

> *Dramatic detail* should be rendered in brief, colorful, pithy description. Less is more.

> *Active characters* are always trying to get, do or accomplish something, often something unobvious or even concealed, as in real life.

> *Settings* help to define characters and augment their predicaments.

- Did any of the characters in any of the stories develop—that is, did anyone learn something and change?

Even in the most ancient recorded tales there's evidence that audiences yearned for the main character to learn and change, no matter how small and symbolic that change might be. This, in the language of drama, is called a character's *development*. Audiences look for it because of the abiding human need for hope.

Just a small, symbolic action at the end of a difficult situation will suggest that change is under way, or at least possible. A story about a rebellious daughter might end with her washing her own dishes for the first time, or defiantly going out in wet weather in unapproved shoes. We understand that she has kept her spirit and will adapt and eventually prosper. Even when such actions take place in strife and heartbreak, they can still be richly satisfying. Rebirth, after all, has its pains.

> Characters who *develop* are those who learn enough from their experiences to make some change in their behavior and take different action.

GOING FARTHER PART I

If you didn't already discover it, there is a rich usefulness in objects and acts; they often connote meaning far beyond what they actually are. If time permits, spin together unused, additional elements from your CLOSAT resources to enrich the brew. CLOSAT is a terrific warm-up exercise when a group starts a new session, and it is an excellent refresher when long discussions become too theoretical and faces glaze over with fatigue.

> *Denotation and connotation*. A picture of an hourglass denotes an old form of clock, but by suggesting the sands of time running out it connotes mortality. Through artfully building contexts, the author can invest prosaic objects, events, or characters with poetic meanings that transcend their everyday appearances.

Assignment 6-4: CLOSAT Variations for a Group/Class

1. Make a card selection for several people and ask them to come up with a story straightaway, with no preparation time at all. This should not be attempted until everyone is comfortable with improvising.
2. Put up a set of CLOSAT cards (say three characters, two locations, three objects, and a theme) and then spin a pencil like a roulette wheel to see who must tell the next story. This can be done a number of times. Everyone must grab for a narrative of some sort because nobody knows whom the pencil of doom will choose.

3. Ask everyone to bring in two (properly coded) images for each of the CLOSAT categories. Pin the pictures up in different orders—try putting all the characters together, all the locations, all the situations. Or, try selecting people to juxtapose their images in a way that has special meaning to them. Stories can be originated by groups or by individuals, according to whatever rules the class or group adopts.

The Power of Imagery

The images you have been collecting in your Picture File (see Chapter 1) are like those that fill our memories and imagination. Interrogating, joining, juxtaposing, or extending them are all ways to initiate stories. The novelist John Fowles began two novels each from the mystery of a single image. Living by the English Channel in Lyme Regis, he once saw a young woman staring out over the sea toward France. Lodged in his imagination she evolved into the rebellious Victorian governess Sarah Woodruff. Fowles decided that Sarah had been deserted after an affair with a French lieutenant, and made her become the fatal attraction for the engaged and conventional scientist Charles. The enormously popular novel that emerged was *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969, reissued 1998). Another of his novels, *A Maggot* (1985), about Mother Lee and the Shaker movement, arose from a mental image that came to him of a group of eighteenth-century travelers, one of them a woman, riding in the half-dark across a hillside. The German novelist W.G. Sebald reproduces photographs, architectural drawings, and even ephemera such as train schedules and bus tickets in his highly elliptical, autobiographically flavored novels such as *Austerlitz* (2001).

Your CLOSAT observations and images will be a vital resource when you come to tackle original fiction assignments. With your news clippings, they will prime your imagination as you tackle news and documentary projects.

GOING FARTHER PART II

If you like improvising from randomly generated elements, try the games in the books below.

Biro, Yvette, and Marie-Geneviève Ripeau. *To Dress a Nude: Exercises in Imagination*. Kendall Hunt, 1998. (A structured approach to developing stories from found artifacts, such as a photograph, painting, or piece of music, and an alternative approach to screenwriting in its own right.)

Rabiger, Michael. *Directing: Film Techniques and Aesthetics*, 3rd ed. Focal Press, 2003, pp. 182–187. (After several tosses of a coin, you may find yourself asked to write a three-character, four-minute comedy scene called "Embarrassing

Moment," set late at night, with a main character the same age and gender as yourself, the main conflict being internal to one of the other characters, and the scene's crisis to be placed near the beginning.)

Spolin, Viola. *Improvisation for the Theater*. Northwestern University Press, first published 1963. (This classic and influential text, reprinted many times, is intended for improvisational work with children, but its methods work with people of all ages. Its philosophy lies behind Second City, mentioned earlier as Chicago's famous school of "improv" comedy, which has produced actors, comedians, and directors of stellar repute.)

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PART III

USING THE TOOLS OF DRAMA

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7

Developing Your Characters and the Dramatist's Toolkit

In this chapter we are going to look at dramatic characters, and then how you analyze the actions they take in a piece of drama.

Habitually we glance at people and intuitively sum up their characters using our life experience. But being able to identify character traits and being able to create credible characters for a drama are very different. What does it take for others to *see* a character and become interested? Whenever you need to develop dimension to your characters, try applying the checklist below. Include from it only what makes the character potent and special or you'll end up with a laundry list of pedestrian information.

Checklist for Developing Your Characters

- Name (formal name and nicknames)
- Volition (what he/she is trying to get, do, or accomplish),
  - Now, in a typical captured moment?
  - Day to day?
  - In the larger pattern of his/her whole life?
- Appearance
  - Age—real and apparent.
  - Body type and condition (healthy, unhealthy, neat, slovenly, etc.)
  - Clothing preferences, colors, textures.
  - Adjectives or analogies (catlike, Easter Island figure, bovine, etc.) to evoke the person's type.
- Origins
  - Place of origin and its associations.
  - Family type, makeup, and beliefs.

- Place in the family and how they regarded him/her.
- Education (formal and informal) and any mentors.
- Parents, guardians, siblings, or other influential figures.
- Early traumas that determined his/her direction.
- Attitude to his/her origins.

Presence
- Dominant moods.
- Mannerisms.
- Active or passive, introvert or extrovert.
- Characteristic physical movements.
- Most at ease when _____, least at ease when _____.

Tastes
- Special interests.
- Preferred food, drink, or drugs.
- Preferred surroundings.
- Entertainment.
- Dislikes.
- Neuroses, phobias, or obsessions.

Speech
- Voice quality.
- Special vocabulary.
- Favorite expressions or expletives.

Relationships
- Most vital relationships.
- Sexual relationships.
- Relationship to self (self-image).

Work
- Job and attitude to it.
- Any work he/she does unpaid.
- Work preferences.

Resources
- Friends and associates.
- Major strengths or skills with people.
- Adaptability.
- Financial situation.
- Beliefs.
- Pride in_____.
- Belongs to, or can call on_____.
- Strengths (as they are, as others see them, or as he/she imagines them).

Vulnerabilities
- Ones he/she acknowledges.
- Ones he/she tries to hide.

Unable or unwilling to adapt to_____.
Bad at_____.
Major flaws.
Secrets.
Enemies.
Major misperceptions
In the past.
Now.
In the future.

THE TOOLS OF THE DRAMATIST

In the Egyptian tombs of King Tutankhamen's period, archeologists found saws, axes, mallets, awls (drills), and chisels—all tools a carpenter uses today, fifty centuries later. The basic shape and function of each remains unchanged because they were developed from working with wood, and wood hasn't changed. The tools for working with drama are nearly as old, and they too are the same because the nature of drama hasn't really changed either. Drama still contains special characters who face special situations, and who must struggle to overcome special difficulties.

Why is using these tools to analyze ideas and rework them so important? Authoring a story is a little like giving birth—the experience leaves you drained, confused, and in need of feedback. What child have I produced? Does it have all its fingers and toes? Paradoxically, it's easier to assess someone else's work than to get some distance on your own, but either way you need critical equipment. Because a story, like a chain, is only as strong as its weakest link, we are always searching for the "problem" areas. Story-editing tools in the hands of a critic help locate these and help you decide how to strengthen them. Criticism, so often assumed to be a negative activity, exists to identify a work's real nature, illuminate its inner workings, and find how to enhance its potential. It's wise to seek it, and supportive to give it.

The toolkit I am about to describe is really a set of concepts that writers use to impose order and function on the unruly outpourings of the human mind. The forerunners to these concepts were set down by Aristotle (384–322 B.C.) in his *Poetics*, an enormously influential treatise on dramatic practice and theory. With them you can dismantle any narrative, examine its makeup, identify its parts, and alter those that are functioning ineffectively. To make these tools visible and memorable, we'll make them into metaphorical objects.

Tools #1–4, Four Hats

These, if you hadn't guessed, represent authorship's four key roles that you encountered in Chapter 1. These roles or identities, as you recall, are:

1. Author's hat (that you wear as you freely generate new material).
2. Analyst's hat (change to this whenever you go into critical, story-editing mode. I will sometimes refer more narrowly to story editing, which is an important and creative aspect of the analyst's role).
3. Presenter's hat (worn when you are pitching a story, and also when you are in receptive mode afterwards as you absorb what the audience has to say about your idea).
4. Audience/Critic's hat (worn whenever you must be a critic or a non-specialist member of the public absorbing a story. The critic usually begins by recapitulating his or her experience as an audience member).

As you go about making, revising, delivering, receiving, or critiquing a story, you wear different hats to remind yourself to stay within your current role. To change hats—from Author to Analyst, or from Analyst to Audience, for instance—means purging your mind of prior knowledge. Only thus can you be as innocent as an audience that sees the work for the very first time. This skill, never innate, is something you have to work at developing. For now, just remember; never wear two hats.

Tool #5, the Questionnaire (Represents Interrogating a Story and Establishing Volition)

A story-editor *interrogates* a story to establish the kind of basic information that we tackled earlier in this chapter. After getting the basics of who, what, when, and where, the story editor asks that central, revealing question about each character: *What is this person trying to get, do, or accomplish?* Whether writing a story, directing actors, or shooting a documentary, you will always need to identify your characters' underlying *will* or *volition*, for this provides the pressure or motivation to do things.

Tool #6, the Diving Mask (Represents Hunting below the Surface for Subtexts)

The diving mask, which lets you see beneath the surface, represents our intuitive ability to examine what is submerged and out of sight in any human interaction. This is called the *subtext*. A couple may be arguing

about whose turn it is to pay the monthly bills or take out the garbage, but the likely subtext (or embracing truth) is, "This marriage is threatened because she's doing all the dirty work."

Tool #7, the Key (the Dramatic Premise)

The *premise* is a shorthand description of a story's essence. A story is like a powered journey; there is a motive for it, a key or inciting reason that starts it happening, and a series of incidents leading to a conclusion that usually reveals the motive for telling the tale. The premise for *The Wizard of Oz* might be, "Cast into a strange and frightening world, the young girl Dorothy learns there is no place like home."

Conflict is the result of blocked will. Often a character's key conflict is wrongly assigned to his current situation or feelings. Try examining this in starkly personal terms: In your own life, what pressures do you feel most keenly, and what are you struggling to accomplish? What stops you accomplishing it? Do you, can you, really know? Characters in drama, like people in life, are seldom aware of their own profundities, and it takes a shrewd observer to see into them. Your job is to *interpret* character, to decide what pressures and forces truly animate each personality. Keep in mind that the minor conflicts of daily life usually serve but one or two major ones.

Tool #8, the Pressure Meter (Detects Conflict and Measures its Strength)

Conflict is present when a person's underlying need is blocked and goes unfulfilled. As you might search a building for electrical power, so you search every dramatic situation for the energizing *conflict* in the main characters. The three major arenas are:

- Person against person.
- A person against nature
- A person against him- or herself.

Tool #9, the Stopwatch (Represents Time Progressing)

Time preoccupies dramatists because they must strive to make their work concise. Using the stopwatch and pressure meter together, you can plot elapsed time against changing emotional dynamics. This lets you turn any story into a representational graph. "Intensity" is the vertical axis and "time

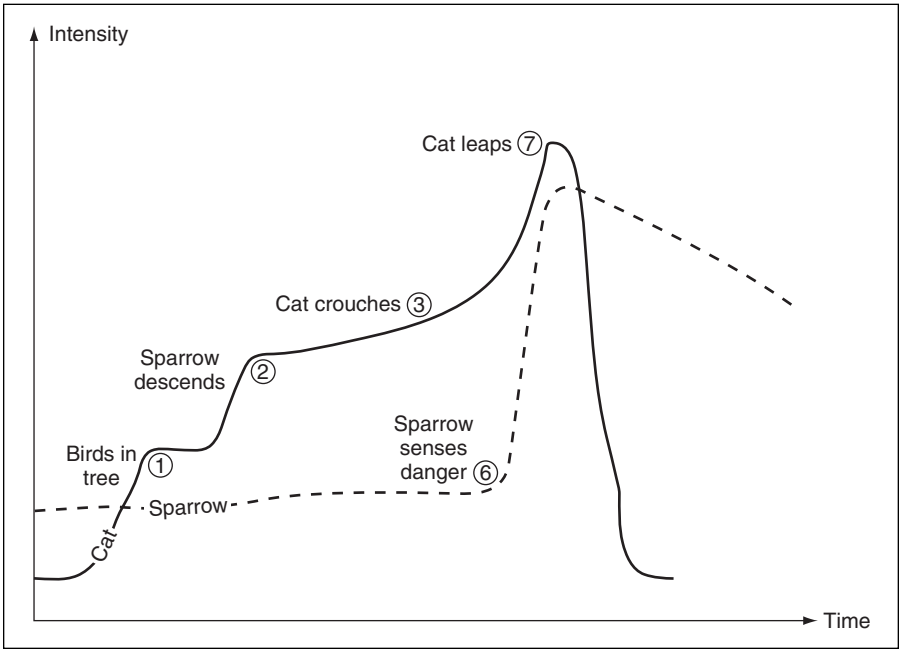

Figure 7–1 Intensity graph for a cat and a sparrow that narrowly misses becoming its prey.

progressing" is the horizontal. Figure 7–1 plots a sequence of a cat trying to catch a bird.

1. Cat goes on the alert as birds arrive in tree.
2. A single sparrow descends nearby.
3. The cat lashes his tail and crouches.
4. Sparrow pecks unconcerned.
5. Cat gathers himself for a leap.
6. Sparrow senses danger.
7. Cat leaps as sparrow takes off.
8. Cat licks his shoulder and returns to bird-watching.

Tool #10, the Cake Slice (Separates Drama into its Components)

The cake slice represents our ability to separate dramatic material into its component parts, each having its own function and optimal placement in the order of the piece.

Tool #11, the Set of Boxes (Representing the Three-act Structure)

Marked I, II, and III, these containers represent where to put the separate pieces of the story. In a story with highly functional scenes, each has its proper place in a three-act structure:

- Act I contains the setup and scenes that define the main character's "problem."
- Act II contains escalating complications as the problem deepens.
- Act III contains the crisis and resolution (see sidebar).

> The *crisis, climax, or turning point* of a scene (or of a whole story) is the pivotal point at which the opposing issues come into final confrontation. The outcome phase that follows is called the *resolution*. In it, the main character's fortunes resolve into something appreciably better or worse.

Tool #12, the Telescope (Finding Point of View)

I like "spyglass," the archaic word for telescope, because it suggests seeing in a privileged and slightly secret way. By using the art of presentation, the dramatist can make us see through different people's experiencing. In the cat and bird example above there are three possible points of view: that of the cat, that of the bird, and that of the detached onlooker. Whose point of view tells the story most dramatically? And to whose point of view might we switch at each juncture of the story?

These widely used methods of analyzing story material should never turn into a dogged and formulaic working method. Analytic work should expand and liberate your ideas as you rework them; it should never become academic and limiting. So use the spirit of these ideas, not the letter. If you listen quietly and carefully, each story will speak to you and tell you what it needs. You will discover for yourself that, after the initial drafting work, all artworks begin to make their needs known and use their makers as servants.

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8

Analyzing a Scene

A scene is a unit of action that usually happens in one place or in one measure of time. To dig into a scene's characters and content, let's now try using the dramatist's toolkit. Actually you can practice using the tools anytime because most of them apply to everyday life.

USING TOOL #5, THE QUESTIONNAIRE

To begin analyzing a scene, put on the analyst's hat and take up Tool #5, the Questionnaire. Your first task is to amass vital information about the characters. Before you examine the characters in their wider context, see what you can say from the evidence in each character's *givens* (that is, the reliable information given in the text). Like detectives, we look at their appearance, age, gender, dress, role, and circumstances (see Chapter 7 "Checklist for Developing a Character") and make a list each for certainties, probabilities, and possibilities. Pay close attention to what characters are trying to *get, do, or accomplish*. This is of paramount importance to all further decisions that an actor, director, dramatic analyst, or critic can make. Every person, consciously or unconsciously, is impelled by tendencies, feelings, and experiences that drive their *will*, or *volition*. There are immediate drives ("Yikes, I'm hungry, that sandwich looks good") and there are long-term drives so pervasive that few people are aware of them. A friend of mine in her twenties suspected from a remark dropped by a family friend that she was adopted, but not until her fifties did she screw up the courage to seek an answer from the woman she'd known all her life as mother. You can imagine how this doubt affected her life, and what emotional journey she undertook while tracing her birth mother's family.

A person's volition arises from temperament, circumstances, and the psychic marks left by experience. Together these influence how we see and how we act. The many small acts of quotidian behavior are subsidiary parts of a few larger drives that are called a person's *agenda*. My friend's agenda was to fully establish her identity.

Seeing your own agenda is really, really difficult, but seeing the contours of someone else's is easier. Make a patient, nonjudgmental observation of their behavior, keep an open mind, and start (privately) constructing a hypothesis, or *premise*, that connects what you know thus far of cause and effect. Especially if you are a journalist, documentary maker, or other professional observer of humankind, you must be open to all areas of human volition, not just what you expect and look for. Typical patterns and starting interpretations might be:

- A disdain for intellectuals and intellectual work. (May be a class conviction arising from envy and suspicion of those better educated.)
- A need to avenge particular kinds of injustice. (May be direct experience of unjust treatment, or anger at injustices suffered by a loved one.)
- Someone always looking for mentors. (May be compensating for someone important, like a parent or sibling, who went absent in early life.)

Modify your theory until it's consistent with the person's behavior. An alcoholic leftist friend of mine, vocally and implacably opposed to the abuse of power in governments and religion, one day confessed to sexual abuse by a priest when he was twelve. The urgency and bitterness of his political life suddenly came into focus, as did his death later when he disappeared from the boat he lived on. Sadly, he was not found until some days later, drowned.

Don't assume all agendas are psychological. Maslow's hierarchy places those that are physiological—for food, shelter, and safety—as first and foremost.[1] Only after "deficit needs" are met does a person begin to think about "being needs"—those for love, esteem, or respect. Last of all comes the need for self-actualization (becoming wholly and authentically oneself and fulfilling one's potential in the world). For a peasant farmer whose kids are half starved, notions of love, respect, or self-actualization won't even cross his mind until he can feed his family. Whether or not he has fulfilled his human potential is simply irrelevant and unimaginable to him.

1. Abraham Maslow (1908–1970), psychologist who studied human needs and arranged them in a hierarchy.

Forming strong, clear, and provocative ideas about people's deepest motives brings authority to what your stories have to say. Remember that a nation acting from "national character" can behave like an individual for the same reasons of collective culture, environment, and history. Relating the small to the large, the microcosm to the macrocosm in your interpretations of life, is a sign of sophisticated thinking. Usually there are no right or wrong answers when you interpret a complex set of facts, behaviors, and impressions. This is what makes art interesting, both for the artist and the audience.

USING TOOL #6, THE DIVING MASK

To use the diving mask and explore below the surface, let's assume you tell me you want to try riding a motorcycle. You say you've always been a little intimidated by them and now want to take a ride. Familiar only to those who know you is an unspoken desire to overcome an old and shaming timidity.

Though what you said was truthful, it is only the surface layer of motivation, for that is all that anyone usually knows. My job as a storyteller, like that of a historian, is to probe for deeper truths. I ask a few questions and it emerges that, more or less unawares, you have taken on a string of risky experiences. Last year you did some rock climbing, acted in a neighborhood play, and sang rather untunefully in a karaoke bar. Each time you went home feeling liberated. Aha, I say to myself.

The historian views the past from an aerial overview. The biographer dives deep for the hidden four-fifths of the truth. This, in dramatic parlance, is called a *subtext*. Dramatists hunt them constantly where they are mainly found—in the realms of intuition. My subtext about your motivation—one that I must now investigate—is that once some crass person made you feel stupid and cowardly. Since self-exposure and courting danger have been so large on your agenda, I imagine that you still feel wounded and want to shuck the unjust labeling. This is my interpretation, and now I must probe further to see if it holds up.

After some basic instruction you are ready to begin that motorbike ride. You straddle the machine and feel its weight. Heart pounding, you insert the ignition key, start the engine, and feel the machine throbbing. You disengage the clutch and select first gear. Apprehensively you let the clutch in. As the monster creeps forward you lift your feet from the ground and the scenery begins to slide past like a dream. You see potholes ahead that you must avoid, and then you swing it to one side to deal with a recessed manhole lid. You have to use your right foot to change up through the

gears and it's awkward. Whoosh! Now you are really moving and the air pushes at your face and into your mouth. You wonder if you are driving too fast and feel a tremor of delicious terror. Then, a white van coming toward you really fast scares you. A little panicky, you feel for where the hand and foot brakes are supposed to be, engage them, and with the blood coursing through your head pull the machine up by the curb. As you get off, your legs are weak from fear. You feel triumphant but also trembly and peculiar. Eureka!

USING TOOL #7, THE KEY (FINDING A DRAMATIC PREMISE)

After you dismount, you look at the ignition key in your hand and marvel that such a small piece of metal can start so much happening. The key to a piece of drama is its *premise*, the underlying idea of the scene or the story. My premise to your ride would be, "To exorcise old fears, _____ (your name) takes his/her first ride on a motorcycle." Finding a premise is very satisfying because it gives you the power of a functional description, one that describes the scene and explains its purpose.

USING TOOL #8, THE PRESSURE METER (DETECTS AND MEASURES CONFLICT)

To search for what pressures animate each character is like being a meteorologist locating the pressures behind weather cycles. Pondering the reason for your motorcycle ride, I mentally applied the pressure meter and, hearing about your risk-taking experiences, guessed that your conflict was an inner one concerning self-esteem. The pressure of conflict—internal or external—is important because it moves characters to action. Seeing the triumphant expression on your face after the ride, I felt that my hypothesis was probably vindicated.

USING TOOL #9, THE STOPWATCH (REPRESENTS TIME PROGRESSING)

A scene in film or theater, unlike a photograph, painting, or book, develops through time. Time and intensity in the narrative "time arts" are interdependent as they are in music. Finding ways to graph a scene's changing rhythms and intensities in relation to the advance of time turns changes of pressure on characters into visible peaks and valleys, as in your motorcycle

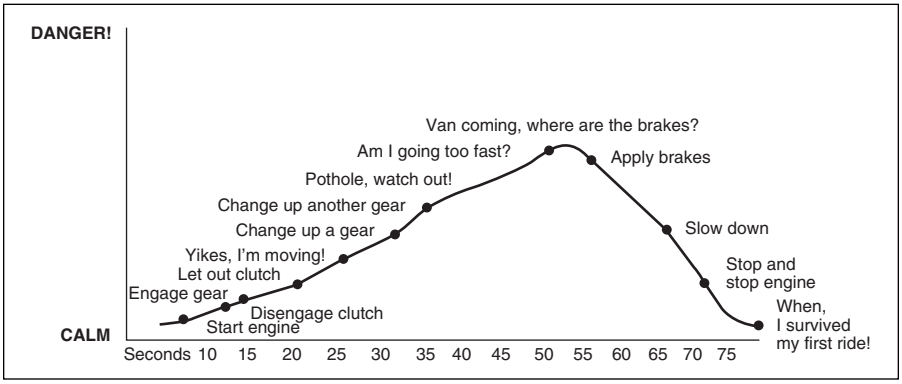

Figure 8–1 Dramatic curve for a scene about a short motorcycle journey.

ride (see Figure 8–1). Both drama and music exist to deliver a changing pressure of feelings to their audiences.

The nineteenth-century graphic representation for drama, called Freytag's pyramid, represented how events in a scene build tension and then release it (see Figure 8–2).

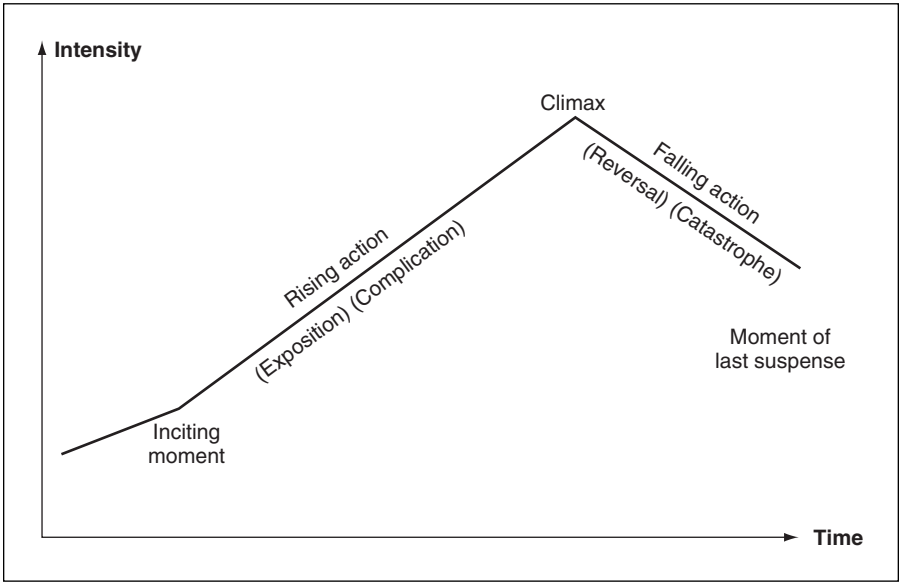

Figure 8–2 Freytag's pyramid showing rising action leading to a dramatic crisis, then falling action following it.

Now known as the *dramatic arc*, graphing is used more flexibly to display, say, the changing dynamics of a canoe race, launch ceremony for a new restaurant, or an episode of lovemaking. The arc always has a high point called the *crisis*. During your motorbike ride this occurred when the white van appeared about two-thirds through your ride. This is a favorite point for a dramatic apex to occur, but a scene crisis can in fact occur anywhere. Imagine a vehicle collision scene that dwells not on the accident but on its consequences (see Figure 8–3).

Or imagine a scene concerning the lengthy preparations for a high dive where the scene ends just after the diver hits the water (see Figure 8–4).

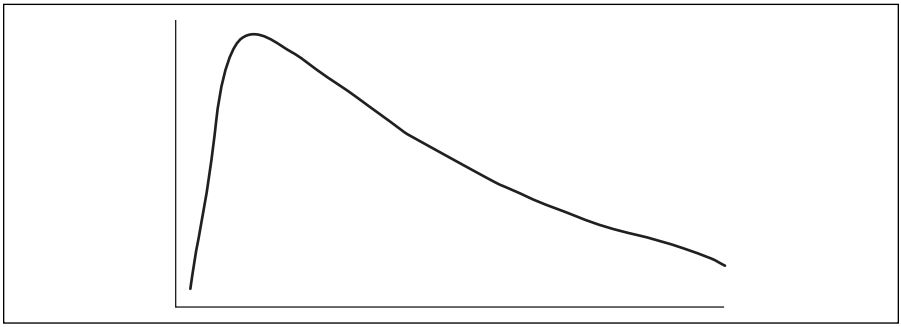

Figure 8–3 Dramatic arc for a scene in which the crisis occurs early.

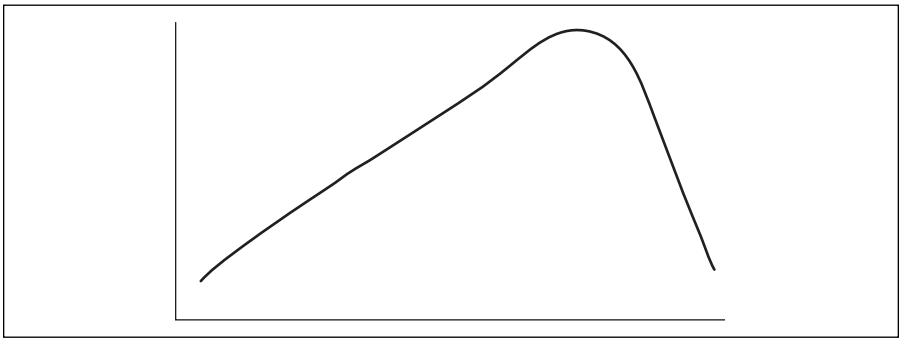

Figure 8–4 Dramatic arc for a scene having its crisis at the end.

When dramatic scenes contain multiple characters, you may need to determine them separately and represent each on your graph with,

- An agenda for each.
- What obstacles each faces.
- How their goals are met (or confounded) during the scene.

Put multiple characters in one graph by giving each character a colored or coded line to represent the raising and lowering of intensity in individual subtexts. This will clarify the content and balance of a scene, particularly when you want to *block* (that is, choreograph) characters and their movements in relation to a camera.

AN ANALOGY FOR DRAMA

We're going to borrow an engine analogy from John Howard Lawson to visualize how drama generates the all-important sensation of momentum.[2] Once you set off riding your motorbike, a series of explosions pushed at the engine's piston and drove you forward. A gasoline engine, however, has a preparatory cycle before each such explosion, and an exhaust cycle following it. A scene in drama likewise has *rising action* before the crisis, and *falling action* after it, as you see on either side of the crisis in Figure 8–1. Both are vital to the scene functioning properly. Were they absent, you'd have an airless torrent of unwarranted crises—like the bombastic "coming attractions" in the cinema which, far from calling you to see them, make them look utterly inept and inane.

Let's look at these preparatory and concluding cycles. Before each explosion and power thrust, the piston sucks in an explosive mixture and compresses it ready for detonation. Drama's equivalent is meeting the characters, grasping their situations, and seeing the main character come under increasing pressure from his "problem."

At maximum piston pressure, the engine gases ignite and the resulting explosion drives the piston down. In drama, conflict rises to maximum pressure, then detonates a major change, or "crisis," in the scene. A scene's crisis can be small (someone taking just one more chocolate before heading home) or it may be large (grandma finally hurls grandpa off the cliff).

After detonation, the engine expels spent gases to prepare for the next cycle. After the scene crisis comes the *resolution* (the chocoholic arriving home, grandpa landing ignominiously in the branches of a tree). Every scene resolution primes conditions for what follows. Its job is to set the

2. John Howard Lawson (1894–1977) playwright, screenwriter, and drama theorist.

audience wondering what will happen next, and we rate its effectiveness by assessing how much *anticipation* it excites.

USING TOOL # 10, THE CAKE SLICE (SEPARATING DRAMA INTO ITS COMPONENTS)

Situations of tension usually divide into three convenient phases:

- The **setup** establishes who, what, when, where, and what the problem is (you, trying out a motorcycle and being afraid you will misjudge and kill yourself).
- **Complications** as the character or characters tries to solve the problem (dealing with the gears, road obstacles, and growing anxiety as the machine gathers speed).
- **Crisis and resolution** as the problem reaches its apex and characters deal with the crisis, for better or worse (seeing the white van is the crisis, and reaching for the brakes and bringing the machine under control, pulling up, and dismounting are the resolution). Then it's time for a new situation (returning the motorcycle to its owner, or taking another ride, say).

In literature, theater, fiction, or documentary cinema, every scene should contribute its dramatic kick to the story's momentum. This might be setup information, a gripping mood, complications for the central character to combat, or a confrontation. You can test a scene's legitimacy once you can,

- Separate it from surrounding material.
- Name its content and function and show they belong in the story.
- Define what impact it delivers to help propel the story forward.

ASSIGNMENTS

Assignment 8-1: Character and Destiny

a. Write a one-page character portrait of an interesting acquaintance (not a family member) and describe three characteristic actions by this person.
b. Guess at this person's long-term agenda (that is, what he or she seems to be trying to get, do, or accomplish in life).
c. Suggest experiences that might have implanted these drives.
d. Predict where this person's agenda might take them in ten years' time.

Assignment 8-2: Volition and Point of View

Think of a memorable event that centers around a member of your family, whom you need not identify. Write briefly what you think that person was *trying to get, do, or accomplish* and consider this from,

a. This person's point of view in the immediate, moment-to-moment circumstances.
b. Your point of view at the time.
c. Your knowledge now of their whole life.
d. Someone else's point of view whose interpretation was probably very different.

Moment-to-moment motivation is often conditioned by immediate circumstances, but longer-term motivations have deep roots in a person's temperament and history. This event, surely, is linked to the larger business of your relative's life—or you wouldn't have remembered it.

Your relative's idea of his or her agenda, your idea of it, and that of the third person were probably different. In each case they revealed not only what the person perceived but also the subjective values and consciousness of the perceiver. "What really happened" may thus be more construed by the onlooker than objectively true. Families are hotbeds of construing, and children leave home to escape being terminally construed.

Assignment 8-3: Acting on Volition

Without disclosing who your subject is, make an oral presentation lasting three minutes or less about a friend's participation in a significant event that you witnessed, describing,

a. The event, including the action your friend took.
b. What *incited* your friend to action, and what he or she was trying to get, do, or accomplish at the time.
c. How this fits in with a larger picture of your friend's drives in life.

Assignment 8-4: Scene Divisions for "The Fisherman's Wife"

Photocopy the story and then,

a. Draw dividing lines between scenes.
b. Give each scene a tag-line description (giving a scene a name such as "Arnold breaks his arm so that his return to work is now further delayed" gives the scene both an identity and a function).

c. Note the strengths and weaknesses the story assigns each character and decide why the Grimm Brothers' tale characterizes them in this way.
d. Define what problem each character has and what determines tension in the story.
e. Graph out a rough dramatic arc for the story.
f. Write a brief interpretation of the story. What is it meant to tell us about human life and human behavior? With many stories this is ambiguous and the interpretation can vary depending on the emphases discovered by the reader. This, of course, is what makes literature fertile.

The Fisherman's Wife

Once upon a time there was a fisherman who lived happily in a tumbledown cottage. One day he caught a talking flounder. To his surprise it said, "Don't kill me, I am a prince. Put me back in the water." When he told his wife, she asked him why he hadn't asked for a wish. Surely he could have asked for a nice clean cottage to replace their miserable hovel? So next day, he called up the flounder and reported what his wife wanted. The fish told him to go home. Sure enough, when he got home there was a pretty little cottage. His wife showed him what a nice place they now had, with a full pantry, ducks, vegetables, and fruit in the garden. The fisherman was sure they could now live very happily, but in a few days his wife found it too small, and sent him out to find the fish again. She wanted to live in a big stone castle, which the fisherman thought absurd. But he did as she asked, and with a heavy heart asked the fish for a castle. Sure enough, when he got home, there was their castle with battlements, towers, marble floors, servants, huge platters of food—everything.

Quite soon, though, the fisherman's wife was dissatisfied again. Why hadn't he asked that she become a king instead of just a fisherman's wife? When he returned to the sea it was dark and dangerous-looking. But the flounder reappeared and again granted the unhappy fisherman his wife's wish. Returning he found the castle bigger than ever, and his wife crowned as king, sitting on a throne encrusted with diamonds and surrounded by ladies in waiting.

But the fisherman's wife was soon bored again. She wanted to be emperor. When the fisherman protested she

became angry, so back to the sea he went, this time finding it heaving and black. Even this wish was not enough, for the fisherman's wife next wanted to be pope, and when she had the rich accoutrements of the Vatican the fisherman asked her if she was not at last happy. But she flew into a screaming rage and demanded that she become master of the universe so she could make the sun and moon set and rise. Back at the ocean, the seas were now raging and the sky black. The fisherman had to shriek out for the flounder.

"Now what does she want?" asked the fish. And when the fisherman confessed what she had ordered, the flounder said, "She must go back to her old hovel—there you will find her."

The fisherman returned home—and they live there together to this very day.

Note: This story will be referred to again in the next chapter.

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9

Assessing a Complete Work

Let's look now at breaking down a whole work. From this we will see how scenes connect, and how the characters or plot animate the story and help maintain the work's momentum. There is nothing scientific about this; it requires interpretation. Your starting point is to consider immediately after a first reading (or first viewing in the case of a film or play) what effect it had on you as an audience member. If you delay, some of what is fresh will depart.

Ask yourself, What sequence of feelings did I go through as I watched? How does the story leave me feeling now? What does it leave me thinking about? What was the story's apex, and what attitudes did I sense it taking toward its characters and their predicaments?

An honest emotional response is the prerequisite for any formal analysis, for head and heart must work together if your interpretations are to be clear-sighted.

USING TOOL #11, THE SET OF BOXES

Applying the questions below will let you decide what goes in each box, for each contains the materials for a single dramatic act. This will help you divide any story into its functional parts. The three-act divisions can be applied to literature or drama of any kind, even to a documentary film in rough-edit form.

The Three-Act Structure

Act I: The Setup

Situation, including the environment and what to expect of the world we find ourselves in.

What is the story's setting? (Characters in a college dormitory, a coal-mining community, or workers in a Chinese restaurant kitchen inhabit special worlds, each with their own rules and conventions.)

What epoch?
What class or kind of society are we in?
What pressures on the characters does each environment exert?

Characters. Who are they and what does each represent?
What are their names, characteristics, and relationships?
Who is most important and why?
What does each character represent in the work's design? (They may represent human qualities: different ages or stages of development; different emotional types, etc.)
What is the main character's agenda, that is, what must he or she get, do, or accomplish? (Consider this for the story as a whole, then define agendas for each scene. Do they add up?)
Through whose point of view do we mainly experience the story? (The POV character is the one whose experience we most share. POV can also move from character to character, according to the storyteller's intentions about what the audience should feel.)

Conflict. What opposing forces are at work in the story?
What major problem does each main character face?
What obstacles prevent them from carrying out their agendas?
*The main character's conflict is between*_____ *and* _____. (Be careful here that you can name forces in opposition, not just an emotion or tension in the central character.)

At what point is exposition complete and the audience in possession of all necessary setup information?

Act II: Complications
How have the obstacles faced by the main character changed?
What adaptations does he or she make while trying to solve each problem?
What new factors raise the stakes? (That is, what developments make the main problem harder to solve?)

Act III: Confrontation, Crisis, and Resolution
What drives the situation toward the final crisis point?
Where do opposing forces come into the final, decisive confrontation?
How is the apex of the problem resolved, and which of the opposing forces wins?
Does anyone learn and grow, even minimally, from this resolution, and if so, how?

Once you have divided the whole into its acts you can assess how well each group of scenes functions within their act. This grouping and analysis helps you spot whatever is missing, misplaced, or redundant.

Making a graph for a whole fairy tale, movie, play or literary work lets you see how the fluctuations of intensity in each scene fit into the arc of the whole narrative, and where the major crisis occurs for the entire work. You can only do this by clarifying what is main plot line and what scenes are

subplots (breakaway digressions that, like rivulets, eventually rejoin the mainstream).

For any work in progress it's wise to periodically graph out its dynamics. Almost invariably you find something wrong with the flow. Similar scenes turn out to be clumped indigestibly together, or a powerful scene happens too early, leaving what follows looking anticlimactic. Visual analysis like this helps you see what an audience can only feel—for good or ill. By rectifying each round of problems, you inch your piece toward strength and consistency. It's very satisfying to feel this happening.

Character-driven versus Plot-driven Drama

When characters generate tension by struggling against the restrictions and obstacles that arise in their way, it is called a *character-driven* story. "The Fisherman's Wife" (see end of previous chapter with the assignments) is character driven because it is the demands by the fisherman's discontented wife that incite stage after stage of the rising action. When it is external pressures that mainly challenge the characters—for example, where three skiers must deal with an avalanche triggered by a posse of malevolent polar bears—we say that the story is *plot driven*. Circumstances under this scenario are so strong that our skiers must respond—each in their own way, of course—to the imperatives coming from the situation or *plot*. The rules of the universe are expressed through "plot" because human beings only learn how the world works from the struggle to get what they want.

> The *plot* of a narrative work is the framework of events that determines cause and effect as the characters struggle to gain their objectives. The plot often expresses societal rules and limitations that the main characters challenge or try to subvert.

USING TOOL #8, THE PRESSURE METER AGAIN (SOURCES OF PRESSURE, IDENTIFYING GENRE)

By searching for what creates the pressures in a story, you can decide whether it seems primarily driven by its characters or by its plot. This in turn helps you place it in a *genre*, that is, in a type or family of stories. An action thriller is usually plot driven, while a buddy movie is normally character driven because it is concerned with what creates, tests, strengthens, or changes friendship.

Round and Flat Characters, and Archetypes

Moral tales that pit good against evil usually have two-dimensional or "flat" characters, each representing either a dominant moral quality (courage, endurance, greed, etc.) or a type of person (inexperienced youth, wise elder, lost traveler, helpless old man, and so on). Traditional stories were developed before the advent of psychological insight, so they are peopled with flat types.

An archetype is literally an "original type." The oldest of all are the hero, heroine, and villain. Other archetypal roles are the antagonist, mentor, and guardian. The darker ones such as the shapeshifter, trickster, and shadow are more ambiguous and interesting. The shapeshifter, for instance, contributes suspense by being changeable or unreliable, thus putting the hero's cunning and initiative to the test. The trickster, often a comic figure, can also be malignant and plot the hero's undoing, while the shadow epitomizes the demons and other dark, repressed forces that the hero (or heroine, of course) must face.

Archetypes are more than simply roles or types in the gallery of human personality, for each embodies convictions about the balance of forces at work in human life. These are cultural ideas, and Carl Jung believed that, because they turn up so regularly in people's dreams, they are held universally in humankind's collective unconscious.

What makes archetypal figures or situations useful to your writing is that once you find one taking shape, you can read up on it and explore the

Developing the characters means supplying each with a particular background, temperament, behavior, tastes, and agenda. In *plot-based drama*, the characters answer to the pressures of their circumstances. In *character-based drama*, the story line emerges from the peculiarities, choices, and drives of the characters. No matter which end of the spectrum you start, characters and plot are symbiotic and will always influence each other during the writing.

Round and flat characters. E. M. Forster divided fictional characters into round characters who are fully realized psychological portraits and flat characters who lack depth and exist to serve a didactic purpose.

Archetypes, according to the psychoanalyst Carl Jung, are more than types of person; each is really a figure representing ancient knowledge of human nature that we carry stored in our collective unconscious. The dying hero, sleeping princess, scheming villain, lost children, wicked stepmother, and cruel master are originals, archetypes that embody what we know about courage, unprotected innocence, cunning, youthful beauty, impatience, sacrifice, and so on.

ramifications it suggests as you develop your own work. As storytellers we are constantly drawing on influences embedded in our culture—from religion, myth, legend, folktale, nursery tale, art, history, psychology, and philosophy—so there is always more to know about an archetype. More knowledge inevitably brings more ideas for extending and developing what your subconscious initiated. Suddenly you find yourself in a dialogue with sources you were hardly aware of. In "Yielding to the Dramatic Conventions" (Chapter 21: Story-Editing Your Outline) we shall return to this.

In contemporary, realist drama the major characters are usually "round,"; that is, they are multidimensional, conflicted, and complex. Minor characters, having only a limited part to play in the consciousness of the main character, often, however, remain flat. Although a flat character can also sometimes be an archetype, a movie crowd scene is unlikely to be all archetypes (unless it's in *Lord of the Rings* . . .). More likely it's a group of types played by "extras." These are cast to suggest diversity and what may be typical for, let's say, a cheap Florida motel, but they seldom embody anything more meaningful.

Another potent source of character types and archetypes is to be found in enneagrams, which are an ancient division of people into nine main types. Each has variations, and you will recognize many friends and family in the personality groupings. See the bibliography at the end of this chapter for a book reference.

Drawing a Dramatic Arc for a Whole Work

A full-length work—whether a movie, play, or novel with many characters and dozens of scenes—can also be plotted as an overall arc. You start by designating the work's major crisis, then you work out what represents rising action leading to it and the falling action that follows. Invariably, graphing reveals like nothing else what is wrong with the flow. Perhaps two similar scenes are clumped together, or you have put a powerful scene too early so that consequent material is anticlimactic.

Drama and Point of View

Every narrative scene (in literature, theater, fiction film, or documentary) should contribute a charge of dramatic information to the story's momentum. This might be setup information, a gripping mood, increasing complications for the central character to combat, or a confrontation between opposed forces. No matter what a scene contains, it is not effective unless it

serves to propel the story forward. Chart dramatic flow by using the same concepts we used to determine the stages in a single scene—setup, complications, crisis, and resolution.

Generally, screen and literary stories alike make us share the experiencing of the major, *point of view* character. In "The Fisherman's Wife" (see end of previous chapter) we see events wholly through the experience of the long-suffering fisherman as he tries vainly to satisfy his ambitious spouse. In the short version of "Red Riding Hood" (following with the assignments) we mostly experience the story from Red Riding Hood's point of view. But during the Wolf's journey to the grandmother's, the story digresses so we share his vantage alone.

Stories with an *omniscient point of view* convey the viewpoint of a detached storyteller whose eye can go anywhere and see everything. This would serve a film well if it were about, say, Napoleon's conquest of Europe because the story has to establish large patterns of conquest rather than the close combat of domestic life.

Consider the telescope in the toolkit as enabling you to see a character's destiny away in the distance. A Greek philosopher famously said that a person's character is his fate,[1] meaning that his inclinations determine his actions, and his actions steer his destiny. You must have seen people creating their circumstances over time: this can be funny, admirable, or tragic. Sometimes the person knows his flaws and fights to change them; but this, too, is part of his character—and just makes him more interesting.

A writer must be deeply interested in the fates that his or her characters construct for themselves, since their energy and determination (or lack of it) literally writes their stories.

ASSIGNMENTS

Assignment 9-1: Dividing "Little Red Riding Hood" into Scenes and Acts

Photocopy the following condensed version of "Little Red Riding Hood", and:

a. Mark in divisions between scenes, and number the scenes.
b. Mark where you would divide the tale into its three acts and justify your divisions.
c. Briefly answer the questions listed in "The Three-Act Structure" on pages 73–74.

1. Heraclitus c.540–c.480 B.C.

Little Red Riding Hood

Once upon a time there was a pretty little village girl, whose mother doted on her. Her grandmother loved her so much that she made her a little red hood, one so becoming that people called her Little Red Riding Hood. One day her mother, who had just baked a cake, said: "Go and see how your grandmother is, for I have been told that she is ill. Take her this nice cake."

Little Red Riding Hood set off at once. On her way through the wood to the next village, she met the wily old Wolf. He very much wanted to eat her, but dared not do so because some woodcutters were nearby in the forest. When he asked where she was going, she replied, not knowing it was dangerous to stop and listen to a wolf: "I am taking this cake my mother made to my grandmother."

The Wolf asked if her grandmother lived far away, and Little Red Riding Hood pointed out the house in the distance. The Wolf said he would go to see her too, and suggested she take one path and he another, to see who got there first.

He set off running with all his might along the shorter road, the little girl continuing on her way by the longer road, amusing herself as she went.

The Wolf soon reached the grandmother's house. When he knocked, the old lady who was ill in bed asked who was there. Pretending he was Little Red Riding Hood, the Wolf said he had a cake from her mother. The grandmother gave instructions how to get in, and the Wolf sprang on the poor old lady and ate her up in no time, for he hadn't eaten in three days. Then he lay down in the grandmother's bed, and waited for Little Red Riding Hood.

When she knocked, the Wolf disguised his voice and called out, "Who is it?"

But his gruff voice frightened Little Red Riding Hood, until she thought, Maybe Grandmother has a bad cold and is hoarse. So she called out "Little Red Riding Hood," and said she had brought a cake from her mother. Softening his voice, the Wolf told her how to enter.

Little Red Riding Hood did as she was told and seeing her enter, the Wolf hid beneath the counterpane. He told her to put down the cake and get up on the bed with him.

> Little Red Riding Hood undressed, but when she climbed up on the bed she was astonished to see how her grandmother looked in her nightgown.
>
> "Grandmother dear!" she exclaimed, "what big arms you have!"
>
> "The better to embrace you with, my child!"
>
> "Grandmother dear, what big legs you have!"
>
> "The better to run with, my child!"
>
> "Grandmother dear, what big ears you have!"
>
> "The better to hear with, my child!"
>
> "Grandmother dear, what big eyes you have!"
>
> "The better to see with, my child!"
>
> "Grandmother dear, what big teeth you have!"
>
> "The better to eat you with!" And with these words the wicked Wolf leaped upon Little Red Riding Hood and gobbled her up.

These are the events in the original Perrault version of the fairy tale; others offer a less violent ending by making the hunters, one of whom is Riding Hood's woodman father, rush in at the last moment. They cut off the wolf's head and save her from becoming dessert.

Assignment 9-2 Character Types and Story Meanings

1. Explain whether the characters in Little Red Riding Hood are round or flat.
2. Are there any archetypes in this story, and if so, who represents what?
3. How many meanings can you find conveyed in this children's tale?
4. Name and briefly describe a round character in a film or prose work that you know, and say what makes this a round character rather than a flat one.

GOING FARTHER

Riso, Don Richard, and Russ Hudson. *The Wisdom of the Enneagram: The Complete Guide to Psychological and Spiritual Growth for the Nine Personality Types*. Bantam Books, 1999. This book is based on an ancient system that divides humanity into nine basic types, with the spectrum of variation between balanced and unbalanced within each type. Very stimulating for a writer wanting to produce more complex and interesting characters.

10

Testing a Story Idea and Deciding Point of View

EXPLORING A STORY'S EFFECTIVENESS

We now need to evaluate whether each part of a story is functioning fully, and whose point of view the story ought to favor. We have said that the starting point for analyzing any narrative is a candid examination of your feelings toward it. Do this sequentially, simply, and without intellectualizing—like a photographer scrutinizing a negative to see what image it holds after exposure. Then try answering these questions, which apply equally well to your own work as to someone else's.

Story Effectiveness Questionnaire

Rate the following:

Impact:

On a scale of 1–10, what was the story's overall impact?

What did the story leave me thinking?

What did it leave me feeling?

Clarity

How clear was the story? Could I see all the scenes equally clearly in my mind's eye, or were some hazy?

What parts could I easily and pleasurably retell, and what parts are difficult to recall? (This is the litmus test, because the human memory cheerfully dumps whatever didn't fire your imagination.)

Potential:
Does the story feel complete?
On a scale of 1–10, rate each scene. Are they all functioning to full potential?
Which elements were strong, which were weak?
Feedback: Now analyze how effective each aspect was and,
Report what is working well, and what is not.
Suggest what might clarify and strengthen whatever is weak. Note that some authors prefer to hear what is problematical and then devise their own solutions. Some people discourage incursions into their creative prerogative.

EXPLORING A STORY'S MEANING AND PURPOSE

Structural and effectiveness analyses only begin to uncover a story's meaning. These further questions will help you decide how a story acts—or might act—on its audience:

What genre is this story and under what rules does its world usually run?
What patterns can you see that might be significant to the story's meaning?
Who is the point of view (POV) character (meaning, through whose feelings and viewpoint do we mainly experience the events)?
What forces does the story make this character (or these characters) confront, and why?
What are the qualities of the main characters and what can we expect of them at the outset?
Does anyone in the story develop (that is, learn, change, or grow)?
When you compare the story's end with its beginning, what major changes have taken place and what do they signify?
Does the story stay within its genre or does it break out of that genre in any way?
Taking the story as a whole,
How does it want to act on us?
What does it say about the individual in relation to the way the world works? (This is often expressed as "the individual in relation to the laws of the universe").
What is the story's premise (that is, what is its content and purpose expressed in one or two pithy sentences)?
What is its theme? (That is, what embracing truth does it seek to establish? Examples: "Crime doesn't pay" or "Women don't make passes at boys wearing glasses.")

An interesting way to give an author *feedback* is to retell the story as a selective and even exaggerated summary. By this you can accentuate what you see as the underlying values, patterns, and emphases. After helping the author to see

it from this point of view, you may then be able to suggest changes or areas for development. Many authors prefer to hear a detailed account of how the story acted on the listener, and then go away to devise their own solutions to the problems that arose. The role of critic is one requiring great tact and respect, especially in a professional situation, where you may be speaking to a writer who has built up years of experience—and layers of defense.

To tackle this chapter's assignments you will need the tools discussed in the previous four chapters. That's a lot to remember, so you'll probably need these memory-aid summaries.

STORY EDITING TOOLS IN SUMMARY

Use these tool-kit summaries until you have internalized them as your own.

1. Components you are likely to find in a single **SCENE**	Setup	Who, what, when, where, and what the main problem is.
	Complications	Obstacles; difficulties; twists, turns, and adaptations as each character tries to solve their main problem.
	Resolution	Problem reaches point where character or characters deal with the crisis, for better or for worse. Things probably change.
2. Components you are likely to find in a simple **STORY**	Act I The Setup	Establishes characters, the main situation, what the main problem is, and what the forces are that the main character faces. Also establishes whose POV we will mainly share.
	Act II Complications	Obstacles the characters face, adaptations they make, the stakes go up.
	Act III Confrontation and Resolution	The story's major forces come into confrontation until the apex or crisis arrives. As a result there is a change, or resolution. There is probably a change or growth in at least one of the characters.
3. Testing a Story and giving constructive FEEDBACK	Impact	Degree of impact was . . . It left me thinking . . . and feeling . . .
	Clarity	I could see . . . but not see . . . I could retell . . . but not . . .
	Potential	The story was/was not complete because . . . All/some parts were functioning, as follows . . . Strong elements were . . . and weaker were . . .
	Suggestions (if the author is comfortable with this)	Effective elements of story were . . . (summarize). The changes/developments I suggest are . . . (summarize).

(*Continued*)

4. Establishing a story's MEANING and PURPOSE	Genre	Story is a . . . type of story The story stays within/subverts its genre because . . .
	Patterns	Patterns that emerged were . . .
	Characters	Qualities of the main characters are . . .
	POV	POV character is mainly . . . (say who) Sometimes POV migrates to . . . (say who and why)
	Conflict and Problem	Major force confronting main character(s) is . . . Conflict in this story is between . . . and . . .
	Change	Overall change that story shows is . . .
	Plot and laws of the universe	Story shows what happens when . . . (type of character) opposes . . . (which particular law of society or of the universe)
	Impact	Story intends to act on audience as follows: . . .
	Premise and theme	The premise in one or two sentences of this story is . . . and it deals with the theme of . . .
	Meaning	To me, the underlying meaning of this story is . . .

ASSIGNMENTS

Assignment 10-1: Impressions and Feedback

For practice you can either use one of your own stories or generate a new one by playing the CLOSAT game. Using the "Testing an Idea" questions, give an oral review of your own or another person's story, and include constructive ideas for further development.

Assignment 10-2: Critical Communication

This is like Assignment 10-1, but goes further.

Read or listen to a colleague's story, then,
Analyze the characters.
Analyze how it breaks into scenes and acts.

Briefly paraphrase the story, accentuating the facets and values that struck you.
Suggest what, in accordance with the author's intentions, would strengthen the story by:
Explaining your understanding of the story's intended meaning.
Saying how effectively it delivers on its intentions.
Describing any changes that might help it deliver more effectively.

PART IV

CREATIVE WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

From this chapter onward you will find one or more examples written by my New York University students in response to an assignment. With each is my response. This allows you to see what a critical response looks like, and for me to point out dramatic features in context as they occur. If you can, try developing your own response to the work before you read mine, and see where we agree. It's important to stress that there are no right or wrong interpretations. Each arises from a careful but subjective reading that itself comes from a life colored by particular experiences. Each interpretation must stand on its merits; if it is attentive to the original and well argued, it can illuminate unseen depths in the narrative. A critic's job is to illuminate what is present or implied. When successful, it is a collaboration that becomes part of the creative act.

Don't be distressed if your writing is less finished than what you find in the samples. The texts aren't verbatim—I have silently edited out all the typos and spelling mistakes that bedevil rapid writing. By the way, please don't make any unauthorized use of the examples in this book—to make short films, for instance—as it would seriously infringe their authors' rights.

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11

A Tale from Childhood

From here on, you start writing. The goal in this chapter is to produce a simple and striking episode from your childhood. The only requirement is that it made a strong impact on you and you remember it very clearly. From this we will look at how memory works and how it far transcends simple playback.

Childhood tales, having you at their center, occur naturally in the first person. If, however, you *displace* the story into the third person ("He went to his car" rather than "I went to my car") you can usefully distance yourself from the central character. Fiction writers do this so they can alter, shape, and evaluate their work without being enslaved to the story's origins.

In this chapter begin the writing examples from the idea development class I taught at New York University. The work and my responses to it will show you comments that are typical for someone using common sense and the toolbox of dramatic analysis. The student samples are emphatically not meant to be models. For you to emulate them would defeat a central purpose of this book, which is to encourage you to write from your own resources and imagination—no holds barred. Take care during this first composing stage to stay in Author mode. Don't let yourself stray into Analyst mode, or you'll be hunting for order and intellectual sense just when you need to write free of restraint. The assignments in this chapter call for bold, even reckless sketch work. By the way, no assignment in this book ever requests an industrially polished end product. Overattention to detail during ideation can be a way of hiding from fundamentals.

ON DISCUSSION

From this chapter onward you are likely to be discussing other writers' work, and there are right and wrong ways to go about it. Your first reaction—to a written assignment or to a pitch or presentation—should always be as an audience member. It is always constructive to report in detail how a story acted on you. So let your thoughts and emotions be freely led by the work under consideration, but be ready to report them. React to how the central characters are presented, to what each scene is about, and to what the piece says to you. Your audience comments can focus on:

- The work's impact as a story.
- What you were able to clearly see with your *inner eye*.
- What you think the work signifies and what it says about the business of living.
- Opportunities you see for developing its potential.

> The *inner eye* is the cinema in your head that replays the material of memory in a starkly truthful way. Whether it is factually accurate is less important, since it represents how you perceive the material. If you work to develop the courage and honesty to record what your inner eye shows—without mediating or cushioning its visions—you will write strongly. The inner eye sets the standards for emotional truth even when you write fiction.

After feedback that establishes initial impressions, the discussion naturally moves to a more analytical, technical discussion. This is as it should be: The heart should precede the head.

When you discuss the assignments for this chapter, bear in mind that childhood is a time of vulnerability and that the arrows of experience strike deep. Memories from this far-off country are usually freighted with some important realization or lesson. In discussion, try to consider,

- How the central character emerges (weak, funny, loved, misunderstood, etc.).
- Whether the memory is a momentary snapshot or scenes having a development.
- What type of experience the central character undergoes (shock, transformation, revelation, hurt, etc.).
- Whether the story has a crisis and what makes it so.
- Whether anyone changes. If so, who changes and how?
- Why does this story remain vivid to the storyteller so long after the events?
- Were there any striking images, and what did they contribute to the story's meaning?

If you review more than one story:

- Can you see any common denominators or interesting contrasts between stories?
- What part did action play in the stories, and what part dialogue?
- Which story had the most impact, and why?

ASSIGNMENTS

Assignment 11-1: An Event from Childhood

a. **Write up an event from your childhood that lives powerfully in your memory.** If possible, choose one you haven't told anyone before and whose meaning remains ambiguous. Stay true to what you see with your inner eye, neither imposing on its pictures nor resisting any form it wants you to adopt. Describe any feelings you remember, but expect powerful memories to be entirely images, events, and actions, with no "me" in sight. At this stage, write in the past tense, first person, or as you wish.
b. **Rewrite your memoir, putting it into the present tense, third person.** Put on your Analyst's hat and, without altering the content, displace the story into the third person, present tense. Something interesting happens: Writing "he is," "she is," instead of "I was" or "you were" converts the event to something happening right now instead of in a "once-upon-a-time" past. Journalism and literature look in the rearview mirror at *something that has already happened*, while *events in the cinema unfold in the present*, even in old newsreel film, which always becomes its own present. Interestingly, dreams also take place in the present, so maybe this is why good cinema feels so much like dreaming.
c. **Write a few lines to say what your childhood episode means.** Once you've made the tense and person conversion, change into your Audience/Critic hat and consider what you have written. Looked at from the outside, what does it signify? That's probably difficult to say. If others discuss your work, you may be startled at how much more they find.

Assignment 11-2: Developing a Childhood Image

a. **Take a powerful image from your childhood** and make it the crisis point of a story arc. Writing in present tense, third person, develop rising action leading to the crisis point, and the falling action after it.
b. **Describe what you think the imagery means** and whether your developed version has been able to fully render that meaning.

Assignment 11-3: Developing a Childhood Film or Photo Scene

a. Taking a film, video, or photo sequence from your family archive, develop an anecdote with a turning point as its crisis. If need be, take unconnected materials and imaginatively link them. We are interested in emotional truth rather than what would stand up in a court of law.
b. **Describe the interpretation** you initially meant to make and assess whether your developed version has been able to fully render the meaning, or has delivered something else.

EXAMPLES (IN RESPONSE TO ASSIGNMENT 11-1)

Example 1 (Vilka Tzouras)

> A young girl with short hair and skinny legs runs down the school hallway muttering words in a foreign language. She's running around trying to organize for a young boy to show his pipi to the girls. Although no one seems to know what she is saying, they all seem to understand. Finally she manages to round up five to six girls and without much effort convinces the boy to pull down his pants and show his goods.
>
> They're all standing in a semicircle around him. Oohs and aahs as they all inspect the sights. The boy suddenly feels flustered, puts his penis back in, and runs into the hallway, where he starts running around in circles. A minute later he is on the floor screaming. He's just broken his leg. They all run up and look at him without saying a word. Finally, he's taken away by the school nurse, and the girls return to the classroom.

The story's author writes,

> From my point of view the story is extremely enigmatic but I will attempt to suggest some possible underlying themes: A young woman discovers her gender; curiosity, and what happens when you are too curious for your own good; sexuality—what can be said and what can't (taboos).
>
> Painful early memories often include feelings of guilt and extreme isolation. Generally their turning points are the mysteriously vicious moments at which the child realizes what is forbidden, what one must not do.

For all its neutrality, this single-scene story has disturbing overtones. Nobody understands the boyish foreign girl, but she organizes a peepshow for her peers—perhaps to seek acceptance. The experiment aborts when their gullible victim spins into a self-destructive paroxysm. Mysteriously, divine retribution strikes the victim, not the perpetrators. Knowing they have broken a taboo, the guilty melt away from the crime, a scene that is surreal because it unfolds without language or mention of sound until the boy breaks out screaming in pain. This violent awakening is clearly the crisis of the scene.

Highly visual, the piece withholds all mention of feelings, but this only heightens its tension and horror. A whiff of brimstone attaches to their sexual curiosity, but the central character is left branded, and the elusive, predatory behavior of the other girls seems malignant.

Example 2 (Alex Meillier)

Like most of the class, this writer was so gripped by his memory that he overlooked the remainder of the assignment.

> Nine years old. I avoided my weekly baths like the plague. Perhaps I had a near death experience in the infant swimming program buried somewhere in my subconscious, but I dreaded the bath. My parents would send me upstairs to bathe and when I was finished my mother would smell me to see if I was clean. Sometimes I would splash water on my hair and come downstairs to try to fool her, but she would smell me and send me back upstairs to finish my bath.
>
> One day I decided to impress my parents. I went into the cupboard under the sink to smell the bottles to find the prettiest smelling product. I found a bottle of Pine Sol, and poured all of it into my bath. I climbed in and washed myself thoroughly. I came downstairs and my mother smelled me. She looked at me perplexed, smelled me again, then yelled across the house for my father.
>
> "Steven, come over here!"
>
> My father rushed over, I was confused, I don't remember what my mother told him, but he grabbed me under my arms, swinging me off the ground and rushed me back upstairs. I was crying and screaming because I couldn't understand what was going wrong. He brought me up to the bathroom, undressed me hurriedly, ran the shower, and got undressed himself. He grabbed a scouring brush from under the sink and brought me into the shower with him.

> He started to scrub my flesh pink and I screamed and screamed. After a while I stopped screaming because the scrubbing was pleasurable. I remember his penis, big and hairy, right in front of my face, jiggling with the aggressive scrubbing motion. I compared mine to my father's, then I took a pee in the shower and he scolded me, but I just laughed, and then he laughed too. When the shower was over he took out a big towel and dried me off thoroughly.
>
> That night I had a bad dream and I yelled for my dad instead of my mom. He came into my room. I told him I was scared because the *hemen gemens* that lived in the carpet was climbing into my bed and biting me. He got out a sleeping bag and laid it in the hall right outside of my parents' room. He closed the door to his room and I slept outside of my parents' door feeling safe and loved.

Told in the first person, past tense, the first act sets up what was normal, then shows us a child trying to do something new that touches off a terrifying frenzy in his parents. In the complications of the second act, he is tossed away by his mother into the enraged grasp of his father, but discovers that his "punishment" is actually his father's frantic will to save him.

This turning point from transgression and punishment to feverish lifesaving is called a *plot point* because the story suddenly turns on its heel and sets off in a new direction. I would designate this as the story crisis. Plot points are invariably effective if you can manage them credibly.

> A *plot point* is a moment where the story unexpectedly veers off in another direction. Plot points are powerful because they divert a story that appears to run in a predictable direction. The storyteller's art maintains tension by keeping us guessing about what will happen next.

During the exorcism the boy notes his father's sexual likeness to himself, but a difference of scale. His father overlooks a taboo (urinating in the shower), and the decontamination ritual concludes with the son lovingly enfolded by his father. The third act is at night when, revisited by fears, the boy calls out. Some people will see this as the main story crisis. Because his father again responds tenderly, the boy rests secure in the knowledge he is cherished. And this, of course, is the story's resolution.

The boy's problem poses a fundamental childhood question—do my parents love me? In the throes of danger, the boy urgently needs to know. Repudiated or abandoned by his mother, the boy finds that his father is not angry but scared, and that the colossus loves him dearly. On the second test, his father proves himself again.

Notice how Alex learns from what his parents do, not from anything anyone says. In life, actions are absolute and unnegotiable. That actions speak louder than words is something to remember whenever you feel the urge to write an earnest dialogue exchange.

Example 3 (Chris Darner)

The morning was damp. It was still dark outside. The house was quiet. A shuffling coming from his parents' room. Clothes. Probably his clothes.

He stumbled out of bed, grabbed a towel and fell into the shower. The water woke him up a little but he wanted nothing more than to be back in bed, asleep, with today not being what it was, when it was. A rapping on the bathroom door interrupted his shower. He flicked off the shower head halfway to listen for words, the water still hissing in the pipes.

"You almost ready?" His mother's voice, uncomfortable.

"Yeah." He didn't feel like using any more words than he had to.

In the family room sat a black duffel bag that his aunt, an airline attendant, gave him for Christmas. Black with a single white stripe, it sat on the couch, filled with clothes. Clothes folded so perfectly that they made the bag square. Only 14 years old, he hadn't learned how to fold clothes quite that well, much less pack them so perfectly into a bag. He thought about how much he loved his mother.

"You ready?"

"Let me put on my socks and shoes." He wasn't even looking up at her. He was too afraid. Instead, he dropped down onto the couch, next to his black bag, and began to put on his socks and shoes. His socks slipped up his moist feet and ankles. His shoes felt tight when he pulled down on the laces.

He held his stare at the floor while his mother fixed coffee in the kitchen. He glanced out into the backyard and could tell by the colors of the gray brick wall that it was overcast. Dark gray sky. He locked his eyes back down on the floor in front of him. He was cold. His body didn't want to be awake.

He held his stare at the floor. He thought how it must look to his mother. How it must look as though he hated her. He wished he could tell her how much he loved her

and how afraid he was. He was so afraid. He was worried to even think about how afraid he was, so he just stared down at the floor, his arms around his stomach to stay warm.

"You hungry? The doctors said you could have some juice if you want, just no food."

"No. I'm fine."

"Well. I'll go warm up the car."

"Okay. I'll just be in here."

His mother walked out to the car with her coffee, leaving the front door open behind her. He felt a coolness and looked out at the granite clouds frozen in the sky. A few minutes later his mother returned and told him the car was ready.

"You got everything?" He looked up at her for the first time since waking up.

"Yeah. All my clothes in here?"

"Yes. I packed your shirts and some shorts but I didn't know what exactly you'd need. I think you'll be wearing a gown most of the time, but we'll see. You ready?"

"Yeah." He stood and grabbed his bag and the backpack he laid out the night before.

He didn't want to linger in his house; didn't want to take a last look at anything, he just wanted to go.

The car ride up was quiet. They took their third car. A big old rust-colored Chevy Malibu Station Wagon. 1973. He remembered the model year because it was the same year he was born. The car radio didn't work, hadn't for years. The hum of the engine and the whistling of the heater would have to do.

Half way to the hospital he pulled a pair of drumsticks from his backpack. He didn't play, but he told himself they were cheap and would be fun to mess around with. Actually, he didn't really care whether he could play. If anyone saw them and asked, he could tell them "I don't really play, just goof around" but [he would] say it so that it sounded as if he played but was just modest about it.

He started to tap the drum sticks against the vinyl dashboard. The vinyl was brick red and rock hard from fourteen years of sun. The tapping increased. He was tapping quicker and quicker and eventually he couldn't get it rolling any faster. So he started tapping harder. He kept tapping, harder and harder. The drum beat quickly fell out of its rhythm and the head of the drumstick in his right

> hand dug into the dash with a loud crack. He put the drum sticks down into his lap and stared down at the peanut-sized hole in the dash. The car was old and had its share of scratches and dings, but there was something about that little hole he just made. He was ashamed. Ashamed and scared. His mother didn't say a word. She knew.
>
> For the rest of the ride he just sat, staring out at all the different buildings and cars they passed. Buildings and cars filled with people for whom today was just another day. They entered the hospital lot and pulled into an empty parking spot. Both he and his mother stepped out of the car without saying a word. One of the drumsticks was lying on the floor and the other rolled back under his seat.
>
> "You want your drumsticks?"
>
> "No." He paused, searching for something else to say to her. "Thanks."

Told correctly in the third person, but still in the past tense, this acutely observed story conveys in four or five stream-of-consciousness scenes about all the lonely dread a person endures prior to a major test of courage. The crisis occurs when his mother, instead of punishing him, rewards her son's stoicism by letting his damage to the poor old Malibu pass without comment. The resolution is that she understands him, and just as importantly, that he knows it. This, too, is a story about the importance of love. The most important person in the world to the boy loves and understands him, so he can be strong.

Note how much of the mother's point of view is implied in this story, and that point of view is, in fact, evenly split between the two characters.

Example 4 (Amanda McCormick)

> A poor, hungry horse is standing in the backyard in the rain. The mother standing at the window with a ten-month-old baby on her hip considers the horse, and sighs. The horse has to be fed. She reluctantly goes outside and finds something for it to eat.
>
> Finally, her daughter gets out of bed, already surly about something. The mother begins to scold her about her horse, reminding her that she has been forgetting to feed it at all for the last few weeks. The daughter explodes at her, reminding her that her authority, since she is the *stepmother*, is not that of a real mother. Then wait till your father gets home, the mother threatens. The mother tries to draw a line

> about the care and feeding of the supposedly beloved horse, but is met with even more anger. The daughter storms out to meet some friends at a shopping mall.
>
> Despite the baby's wails, the house is very quiet. The mother looks out at the scraggly horse standing in the rain. She is still angry at her stepdaughter and is not going to wait on this problem a day longer. She bundles up the baby and puts her in a stroller, puts on her own coat, goes outside and leads the horse out of its pen.
>
> The mother, the horse, and the baby start off down the road together. They pass rows of houses and rows of orange groves. Perplexed motorists honk at the sight for lack of a better reaction, but one man does stop and ask her if she needs some help. She stops briefly and shakes her head, no, and continues on her way in the rain.
>
> When she reaches the stables she is even more determined on her course of action. She offers the horse to them free of charge and they readily agree. The mother and the baby turn back in the rain and begin the trip home.

The writer adds:

> I am the baby in this story so strictly speaking I am too young to remember it. I remember my mother telling it to me over and over when I was young, so I have come to strongly identify with it. I have a strong image of my mother, myself, and the horse on the road, probably partially invented, but nonetheless an image that has shown up in my writing. Another thing that is important to me thematically about this story is the way that so much conflict can be invested in the image of something essentially innocent, like the horse.

Told in the present tense, third person, and with the requested afterthoughts, this potent and highly understated four-scene piece really belongs with family stories in the next chapter. I thought I'd include it here to show how easily memory appropriates another's experience as one's own.

In mainly image and action, the first act lays out the inexorable conflicts of stepfamily life. The stepdaughter is acting up—angry perhaps at being displaced by a girl baby—and she willfully neglects her horse. The locus of her anger is her stepmother, who must draw a line between acceptable and unacceptable behavior. She does so in behalf of the poor horse, condemned

to stand hungry, wet, and neglected. The subtext, however, is that her own future is at stake, not just that of the horse. I would choose the story crisis as the decision to give the horse away, with the resolution in the third act being that the two innocents, horse and baby, must take a long, wet journey through an uncomprehending world.

Giving the unvalued and unloved animal to people who will care for it has an implacable justice. The all-too-imaginable repercussions lie outside the story, like a picture that makes you imagine what is outside the frame.

Two powerful images stand out in this piece. One is the mother's view, framed by the window, of the "scraggly" horse standing outside, hungry in the rain. The other is the little cavalcade advancing through wet traffic—horse, baby, and the baby's implacably angry mother.

Here are the makings of a revenge tragedy. As in some classic Greek drama, the king's new wife must force the antagonistic princess to accept her authority. The story lacks the final *confrontation* between the two women, but this could be developed. Interestingly, though the mother's act is justified, everyone loses. The stepdaughter loses her horse; the horse loses its home; the absent father loses his household (to strife); and the stepmother loses (for the time being) all liking by her stepdaughter. But this is an investment to gain respect and signify that she will neither be abused nor ignored. No wonder this story is preserved in the McCormick family.

DISCUSSION

When you discuss the stories, consider,

- What did they have in common?
- What themes did you detect?
- Did all the writers stay in treatment form (third person, present tense)?
- How were central characters' motivations and feelings conveyed when you could not know their thoughts and feelings?
- How comprehensive were the writer's analytic comments, and what did the writer learn from his or her audience?

Childhood memories commonly preserve those awful moments when you woke up in horror to a demarcation line or taboo that you hadn't known existed. Collectively, the examples above convey how painfully and even violently children learn the ways of the world. In drama as in life, the *crisis*, or *turning point*, often follows a major act by a central character, as when the mother won't tolerate the horse's victimization any more and decides to give it away. From this point onward everything must *resolve* into a new and changed situation.

On Memory

Our reality as children is that we lack power in a world of towering and incomprehensible power structures. Our safety depends on the family that should love and protect us, and more than anything we fear alienating them. How to get through this dark forest is the stuff of myth, legend, fairy tale, and folk story, all of which organize the commonest human anxieties into narratives that plumb how things are.

Memory preserves what is freighted with significance, and thus everyone owns a highly visual and poetic trove of memories. In three of the tales the central character crosses the threshold of the unknown and gains new knowledge. Numbers 2 and 3 are about the solace of love, while number 1 is darker because the child is alone and isolated. By indulging forbidden curiosity, she triggers divine injustice upon the victim. In number 4 the struggle is between women of different generations. Its subtext is a conflict over relationship to the absent father.

Long-held memories often involve archetypal figures who are both representative and symbolic. Memory returns them in imagery and action rather than in words. Dreams often follow the same path, the dreaming mind projecting its most powerful meanings through symbolically loaded objects, images, and action.

The human memory is a storehouse that sifts and reorganizes what it conserves. Whatever lacks significance goes into deep storage, but whatever holds meaning remains close at hand for retrieval. See in your journal how effortlessly your memory pares events down to poetic actions, images, and moments? Because art does this too, we can say that the artistic process and that of memory are intertwined. Art takes what is significant and arranges it to stimulate a psychic journey in another person. The best cinema likewise compresses events into a shared stream of consciousness, one that evokes a journey of the mind and heart.

GOING FARTHER

Some novels you might enjoy that handle children's subjective consciousness in a masterly way:

Atwood, Margaret. *Cat's Eye*. Anchor Books, 1998. (Extraordinarily acute account of girlhood that is particularly good on the treachery in friendships between girls.)

Dickens, Charles. *Great Expectations*, 1861. (Many paperback editions. About a lower-class youth in love with the ward of the embittered Miss Haversham. His novel probes the bitterness of love that fails because parents have manipulated a daughter's feelings. This great novel and its extraordinary psychological insights emerged from Dickens's four-year period of unsuccessful courtship.

His lifelong sympathy for the young was apparently rooted in a period of crushing shame and loneliness experienced as an eleven-year-old, forced to work underground in a London boot-polish factory. The rest of his family were incarcerated at the time in debtor's prison, an experience magnificently displaced and transformed in *Little Dorrit*.)

Salinger, J. D. *The Catcher in the Rye*. Little, Brown and Company, 1991. (The moving American classic that covers two days in the life of sixteen-year-old Holden Caulfield after he has been expelled from school and goes to New York.)

Wolff, Tobias. *This Boy's Life*. Grove/Atlantic, Inc., 2000. (Superb memoir of a life in which boyish pleasures had to be snatched from under the eye of an abusive and controlling stepfather. The boy supersedes the tyrant, reunites with his older brother, and eventually wins the fair lady—their unlucky but spirited mother.)

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12

Family Story

Now we move on to a story passed down in your family, which means tapping into the mainstream of the oral tradition. All families tell tales like Amanda McCormick's in the previous chapter. They usually focus on a family member's distinguishing characteristics, a turning point, a warning, a particular person's destiny, or some other memorable circumstance. Often dating back a generation or two, they epitomize something important about the family's collective sense of identity. Some are funny and paint a trenchant portrait; others convey qualities or values that can only be relayed elliptically in parable form. Frequently they have a dark, sardonic quality pointing at obstinacy in the face of great odds, inherited weaknesses, misplaced ambitions, or some other regrettable character trait against which the listener should be armed.

My mother used to tell such a story about my father. During the down-and-out 1930s when they were impoverished newlyweds in London, she was ill in bed and sent her young husband out with the last of their money to look for food in the street market. He was gone a very long time. When he returned he was holding not groceries but an ornamental silver fish server, and visibly proud that he had bargained it down to an exceptional price. And here, surprisingly, the story just stopped.

To me as a boy it signified that, in the antediluvian times before my sister and I came along, my father had been charmingly unworldly. Half a century later the story yields more somber meanings—that he neglected her when she was vulnerable, but must always be forgiven. All through my childhood she told stories about his fatherless and hungry life as a Paris street urchin, and about his mother's neglect and abuse of his emotions. She might have told other, equally true stories to illustrate his tenacity, pragmatism, and ability to improvise much out of little. Those who knew him from his work as a film

makeup man might have told what I learned later—of his meticulous craft, charmingly sociable nature, and insatiable need to be liked by pretty women. My mother chose to see him as naïve and boyish, but before I was out of my teens, her stories about him mysteriously ceased.

Family members tell stories to entertain and paint the essentials in a few deadly strokes. Whoever tells good stories controls family history, for this is how we frame each other. Picture frames limit what we see of the subject, and yet hint at what lies beyond. Stories often do the same.

How frequently each story was told, how it changed over the teller's lifetime, and which stories persisted all hint at the hidden agendas, private understandings, loyalties, disappointments, and other flux in the currents of family relationship.

To write in *scene outline* form:

- Write only in the present tense, third person.
- Write in abbreviated short-story fashion and use brief, pithy descriptions.
- Describe only what can be seen and heard by the audience.
- Exclude dialogue, shot descriptions, and author's comments. Where a dialogue exchange is unavoidable, briefly summarize its contents.
- Use a new paragraph for each new scene.

It takes vigilance to stay in the present tense, third person, because we learn early to associate stories with the past ("Once upon a time . . ."). When you finish a draft, let it sit for a day or two before rereading it. Write more drafts before you show your work to anyone, just as you would with any important piece of writing.

ASSIGNMENTS

Assignment 12-1: A Story Told in Your Family

a. Take an account handed down in your family, one that:
   - Can be set anywhere and at any time.
   - Does not concern yourself.
   - Is visual and behavioral and translates well to the screen.

Describe the incidents and establish the characters using *scene-outline form* (see sidebar). Writing in this compressed form enables you to get the essence down on paper fast. Then you can present it for examination, much as the architect of a large building might first show a model.

a. Write brief analytic notes on:
   1. The story's underlying meaning.
   2. Any special narrative or film production problems of which you are aware.

Assignment 12-2: Family Story as Comic Strip

Take a family story and,

a. Describe it as six or more key frames as though it were a comic strip, or the panels of a painting series.
b. Describe what's significant in each key image.

Assignment 12-3: The Untold Story

a. Take a family film, video, or photograph(s) and write the story that should have been told concerning it, but wasn't.
b. Describe the key images or sounds that hold special significance.

Discussion

If family stories are links in the family's oral tradition, see what each story has to say about,

- The central character as an individual.
- The central character's role in the family or in society.
- What the central character is trying to get, do, or accomplish.
- The world the characters find themselves in.
- A philosophy of living or of problem-solving.
- What lies below the surface of the events it portrays (what is the story's subtext, in other words).

EXAMPLES (IN RESPONSE TO ASSIGNMENT 12-1)

Example 1 (Margaret Harris)

P——, a woman in her fifties, goes with her husband on a trip to Russia in the 1960s. Her husband is a doctor knighted by the queen of England for his advancements in surgical procedures. He is a rather uptight, strict person with a constant need to criticize and control his wife. She on the other hand is an artistic and extremely talkative person who gets strange notions in her head and can't let go of them. . . .

They arrive at the hotel, and because of their wealth, their accommodations are extremely luxuriant. Their room is equipped with a beautiful crystal chandelier that hangs from the ceiling radiating a shimmering rainbow of colors.

The satin walls are papered ornately, and the oak floor is covered with an exquisite Persian carpet. P—— is concerned that their room is bugged. Her eyebrows twitch nervously beneath the glow of the chandelier. It makes sense to her because her husband works for the British Foreign Office and the prominence of his position accustoms her to such impositions when they travel abroad. She begins looking around the room. She looks everywhere, and her frantic and capricious manner is unstoppable. No article of furniture is left unturned. Her long groping fingers probe every nook and cranny of the room.

This is disturbing to her husband and he becomes so upset that he decides to dine without her, as she will *not* leave the room until she has found the bug.

Her search continues to escalate more frantically, as greasy-haired and raincoated KGB officers seem to recite dogma in her ears. Having checked every possibility she finally decides that it is perhaps planted underneath the carpet. To pull the carpet up she has to remove large pieces of furniture. She does this herself, as she is by no means a small woman, six feet tall and weighing a healthy 175 pounds. Panting and exhausted, she discovers a small golden knob in the center of the room. *This* must be it, she thinks! It becomes clear that one can unscrew it. She musters all her strength to unscrew the golden plate that is on the floor.

With a sigh of relief she looks around to see that the KGB men have disappeared. However, a large crash comes from below, as well as screams. This concerns her greatly. She quickly tries to put the room back together and look as if nothing happened. Seconds later the management enters and tells her in broken English that she has unscrewed the chandelier in the room below.

Author's notes on the story's underlying meaning and importance:

My relative P—— was always doing foolish things. This wasn't the only time something went crashing from one floor to another. Once she left the bathtub running and it fell through to the floor below.

- Paranoia can lead you to act without thinking.
- Her imagination made for great moments in life that at the time must have seemed embarrassing.
- Her marriage was so unhappy and controlled that she got out of control in other ways . . .

- Women didn't have careers then, and so were more apt to make up grand schemes.
- This was the only way she could get her husband's attention. Even bad attention was better than none.
- She married someone like her father, also cold and aloof. This was her way of being defiant.

About themes, the author says,

- An artistic personality when crushed will find other ways to create—even scenarios that are not real.
- A truly happy person learns to trust, whereas a person who doesn't trust is more apt to be under someone's control.
- If you expect someone to act foolishly, they will.

The author's notes need nothing extra from me. Apart from the setup details, it is practically a one-scene story. I am touched by the loneliness and sadness of the unloved P——, and by the way that anxiety generates a myopic foolishness that only deepens her isolation. These are the familiar, bittersweet, comedic characters living "lives of quiet desperation." The story successfully blends farce and tragedy, an exceptional combination that comes with a rare kind of compassionate vision.

Example 2 (Amanda McCormick)

For weeks she has waited to catch a glimpse of him leaving school, shopping at the corner market, or walking home through the center of town. Then the note is passed during the final period of English Composition. Dan B——, the catch of Barstow, wants to go out with her this Friday night.

Trying to convince her strict parents that this would be a good idea is another matter. They insist on meeting this young man before he takes their daughter out.

The big night arrives. She has spent hours primping—and praying that her parents wouldn't ruin this moment by scaring away her new boyfriend. The doorbell—she races to get it. Just as she opens it, the voice of her mother comes up from the basement: "Come down here."

They inch their way down the basement steps and walk into her mother's workshop—for the mother is an avid taxidermist. To the girl's horror she realizes that at this moment her mother is *skinning a mink*.

The boy stammers while the girl registers a look of great embarrassment. Before she can figure out a way to drag the boy out of the door, her mother has charmingly engaged

him in conversation. She scrapes and cuts at the skin of the mink as she asks the boy how the baseball team is doing.

The girl stands next to what might be the most attractive boy in the entire junior class, realizing that she may never be asked out again in her entire high school career.

Author's notes on the story's underlying meaning and importance:

- This is my mother's story. She always would tell it for great comedic effect, but that concealed what was probably a very painful and embarrassing memory. In a funny way, it tells the story of her parents who constantly threw up obstacles to her freedom and happiness when she was young. It also expresses how most teenagers view their parents as strange and potentially embarrassing creatures.
- If this were a movie, it would be important to convey the backstory that sets it up: what the family was like and whether this incident was a recurring type of event. It might also be difficult to convey what is going through the head of the girl as this scene is happening.
- The pathos and eccentricity of this story are what make it stick in my mind. It is often said that humor and tragedy are closely related, opposite sides of the same ever-turning coin. I find I am attracted to that very powerful comparison.

Told in only three or four scenes, this story has a gruesomely funny central image—the dead animal having its beautiful skin torn off—that conveys with powerful economy the central character's predicament under the horror-stricken gaze of her beau.

Commenting as it does on the scene's meaning, the skinned mink is a *motif* (see sidebar). A motif is a valuable signaling device where other detail might distract us from registering a central concern.

> A *motif* is a representation—visual, aural, verbal, or musical—of something important about a character, situation, subtext, or scene. A *leitmotif* is a motif used repeatedly and associated with a dominant theme. In his novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* Thomas Hardy uses red and white imagery throughout to signify the relentless violence (red) perpetrated on his pure-spirited heroine (white) by the men who profess to love her.

Film, with its shifting eyelines and closeup framings, is good at suggesting a character's subjective point of view, as implied here. We see the mink only from the girl's point of view, but we could easily see it from the boy's, too. Imagine that we see his eyes dilate as he takes in what the mother is doing; now he looks up at the mother's face, looks across to his date, then back at the hands cutting and scraping at the bloody mink as the mother makes charmingly artificial conversation. Of

course, he sees that he is the next specimen if he lingers with this weirdo family.

Scenes become richer as we sample other points of view. The two teenagers see the mother, but the mother's awareness of them is also part of the tension for the viewer. We understand that the heroine feels she is losing not only "the catch of Barstow" but also the possibility of all future dating. This would be stronger if the destructive power of school gossip has been *established* during the film's exposition (see sidebar).

For us to infer this, the piece must establish the school's pecking order and maybe show how far a student can rise or fall socially (see sidebar definition of exposition).

Respectable girls in Amanda's mother's day had to wait stoically for Mr. Right to come along and choose them. A motif to express this—and one organic to the basement setting—is the spider awaiting the fly. Motifs like this arise from searching for similes for the heroine's predicament. Did you also notice how even "the catch of Barstow" has taxidermic connotations of hunting and killing? Hints like this will emerge in your own work, and it is no coincidence that your subconscious places them there. Consider this as the story hinting where you should take it.

Multiple points of view privilege the audience with insight into the consciousness of characters other than that of the main or POV character. This evokes the multiple awarenesses that coexist in any populated scene, and projects a more richly imaginative experience for the audience.

Establishing. Any drama must provide expository clues to establish whatever is vital about a character, time period, place, social group, or other defining aspect.

Exposition, or *setup*, is the principle of *establishing* the necessary factual framework that the audience needs to comprehend the drama. These might be: day or night, time period, place, relationships, social class of the protagonists, and so on. Good exposition doesn't hold up the action or draw attention to itself. It should be subtly embedded in the action so the audience doesn't notice that it is being informed.

Amanda's terse tale uses a range of symbolic and juxtapositional techniques alluding to the medieval myth of the princess in the tower:

- The heroine stalks Dan at the beginning. When a princess went out with the hunt she was likely to see, or be seen by, the choice of her heart, the poor but handsome commoner.
- She wills him to choose her. The gods assist. . . .
- Towers are to be breached, and sympathetic handmaidens exist to carry messages.
- Now she must oppose the will of her parents—the king and queen—to see him.

- She primps to make herself worthy. No self-respecting princess is without a mirror. All interesting characters have flaws; hers is narcissism.
- When her lover appears, he is summoned for royal review.

In my reading of the tale a slew of ironic *juxtapositions* emerge. They include hunter/prey, secret message/English lesson, petitioner/freedom, upper house/lower dungeon, mother/taxidermist, and mink/girl, mink/boy. Narrative art profits from giving the audience puzzles to solve, work that is performed mostly at an unconscious level and aided by contextual references—in this case to fairy tale. By integrating the traditional with the modern, Amanda's family story confronts us with elements that make an ironic and eloquent commentary.

Poetic allusions enter the oral tale by increments with each retelling. Embellishment is natural to storytelling; it is how stories grow. Telling, getting feedback, and improving the next telling are the lifeblood of the oral and theatrical traditions and are deliberately incorporated in this book's methods.

Juxtaposition also alerts the audience to a *subtext*—the more profound meanings that lie under the surface of events—in either fictional stories or real life (see the sidebar).

Juxtaposition in film was first called *montage*, the French word for "assembly" or "showing." Russian film theorists of the 1920s developed four principles of narrative juxtaposition:

- *Structural* (advances the stages and logic of a story or scene).
- *Relational* (creates contrast, parallels, or symbolism; for example, a baby crawling edited against a seal flopping across rocks).

Juxtaposition means placing contrasting objects or elements in proximity to make us interpret each in relation to the other. The peace demonstrator who placed a flower in a soldier's rifle during a 1960s face-off constructed a brilliant paradox. This single image launched a thousand sympathetic press stories and came to symbolize the justifiable unrest of a whole era. Juxtaposing objects, actions, images, sounds, or ideas is at the heart of film language because it makes the audience search for implied meanings.

Subtexts are the meanings that underlie surface events, and they exist in intelligent fiction as they do in life. A loner neighbor who calls at your house to avowedly lend you a book may actually want to (a) assess your worldly goods for a burglary, (b) make a new friend, or (c) ingratiate himself with you before the gossips go to work. The reader or observer uses knowledge of the context to guess what the visit's subtext really is. Scenes of tension often have subtexts that are ambiguous and at extreme variance with surface events.

- *Conflictual* (counterpoises opposing forces, such as intercutting shots of Palestinian youths hurling rocks with shots of an advancing Israeli tank).
- *Elision* (removing time or an unnecessary part of a process, as in a jump cut. For example, a field of wildflowers in summer, then cut to the same field blanketed in snow, indicating a jump in time).

Juxtaposing images or events compels the audience to draw conclusions. Inventive pictorial composition and *blocking* (positioning or moving characters and objects against each other within the frame) does something similar within a single frame or shot. Stranded fishing boats propped up in a dried up lakebed, for instance, will speak volumes about a government dam project.

By all means build such techniques into your writing, but not necessarily in a first draft, or you'll get tangled up with form when you should be developing content. When you come to reread and redraft, you will discover clues waiting to nudge the next stages into being. Writing is an evolutionary process, never a one-shot test.

Example 3 (Peter Riley)

It is 1965 in New York City, the upper West Side on a rainy afternoon, night approaching. The sidewalk is busy with people making their ways home from work, stopping off for a drink, waiting for a bus. An attractive young woman in her early twenties waits at the corner for the light to change, doing her best to cover her hair from the rain with a newspaper.

A fresh-faced man in his early thirties, hair neatly combed and wearing a simple suit, strolls up beside her, his umbrella aloft and shielding him from the drops. He watches the light change and then notices the girl beside him. He is obviously quite taken with her. The crowd on the corner surges across the intersection as the traffic comes to a halt, but he only stands there and watches her walk away. He suddenly snaps to reality and dashes across the corner after her.

The man catches up with the young woman and politely asks her if she'd like to share his umbrella as far as she's going. She is mildly surprised but grateful, and he seems unthreatening. They stroll down the sidewalk and chat about the weather, how the days are getting shorter—until finally the woman stops and announces that she's reached her destination. It seems that she's meeting her boyfriend

here for an early dinner. He can be seen waiting at a table inside. The young man, disappointed, tells her it was nice meeting her and carries on his way. She watches him go, curious. Then she enters the restaurant and joins her boyfriend.

As they are about to order, they are suddenly interrupted by the young man with the umbrella, who politely asks the young woman for a moment of her time. She steps into the lobby under the watchful eye of her flustered companion, more curious than ever. The young man presents her with a small bouquet of flowers and tells her he absolutely must see her again.

Author's notes on the story's underlying meaning and importance:

- As romantic and impossible as it may seem, this is how my parents met.
- The story's meaning or importance lies in the chance taken—the fact that a random meeting that could have been only that and nothing more ultimately resulted in a lifetime partnership and a family. Sickening as it may be in our cynical day and age, it is a paean to love at first sight.
- This story presents no real narrative or production problems.
- This story would seem on the surface to have little relation to my themes; but there is a connection to be found with the theme of the individual in the modern world. In this story two souls who are perhaps intended for one another seem to meet by "chance," surrounded by the gloom of the city and its faceless, uninterested inhabitants. The most human of emotions finds its way in an environment that would seem to stamp it out.

In the commotion of the city, a rain shower threatens the mild young woman's beauty and composure, so the chivalrous young man offers the shelter of his umbrella. This she accepts because, in her coolness and curiosity, she judges him harmless. When he returns she becomes "more curious than before." By presenting her with a "small bouquet of flowers," he shows that he is stricken and "absolutely must see her again." Who could resist? Improvising like some Gene Kelly singin' in the rain, he proffers his heart. The boyfriend waiting at the table will get nowhere, for all he can offer is dinner.

Note the brevity with which Peter evokes his main character. He "strolls," is "fresh faced," has "neatly combed hair" and wears a "simple suit." A few key details establish a most appealing image. You always aim for poetic compression like this in any proposal, outline, or screenplay.

> *Character and action descriptions* in a scene outline are best when you use the compressed and evocative language of poetry. Later, for a camera that can only observe, you must develop special imagery, action, and behavior in the screenplay to establish the values so effortlessly specified in descriptive language. We can know characters only from what they do and say.

However, when you expand to the screenplay, adjectives may not be enough. The screen needs active, behavioral equivalencies that won't be submerged in a busy urban setting. Notice that what seals the young man's ascendancy is true cinematic action: He offers his umbrella against the unfriendly elements, and then thrusts flowers at her with his confession of vulnerability. These are actions straight from early traditions of courtly love. Notice that the point of view (POV) character is Peter's father at the beginning, but that it migrates halfway through to his mother.

Young writers like to flex their power by evoking what is dark and the ugly, so it is refreshing to see someone appreciating his parents' qualities by telling their love story. Good storytellers hold their audience with humor, hope, or flashes of beauty as leavening to the sterner stuff.

GOING FARTHER

Carmack, Sharon Debartolo. *The Genealogy Sourcebook*. McGraw Hill, 1998. (A good starting guide to genealogy. Tells how to start interviewing and logging the details of your family. Start with the oldest members, one of whom may already be the unofficial family historian. Be warned, you have started down the trail of an addiction!)

Rabiger, Michael. *Directing the Documentary*, 4th ed. Focal Press, 2004. (For more about editing principles, see Chapter 5, "Screen Grammar," in particular pages 146–149, "Shots in Juxtaposition.")

Stone, Elizabeth. *Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins: How Our Family Stories Shape Us*. Transaction Publishers, 2004. (Wide-ranging survey of family stories that "define our sense of the unique nature of our families, and our own places in them" and provide "inspiration, warnings, and cherished values." This compendium sorts family tales into groupings that define the world, the family, or the individual.)

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13

A Myth, Legend, or Folktale Retold

Myths, legends, and folktales are enduring and authorless tales. They represent cultural assets that any writer can use. Indeed, they survive from antiquity because they remain ever adaptable and potent for capturing the pressures and choices in contemporary life. They have important differences.

A *legend* is history made inauthentic from repeated telling. That is, the tale treats real people and events from history, but they have been reshaped to answer each succeeding generation's needs. For instance, King Arthur almost certainly existed, but not as legend says. Over centuries, countless traveling storytellers embellished the different stories, and now, more than a thousand years later, Arthurian legends remain alive and well. They still make pertinent comments on love, loyalty, honor, faith, humility, and courage—the tests that make life such an illuminating struggle. Bert Olton's *Arthurian Legends on Film and Television* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2000) lists 250 productions alone that are either about Arthurian legends or inspired by them.

A *myth* is rather different. It is a tale, sometimes involving the supernatural, dealing with aspects of human experience that are inevitable and insoluble. Myths illustrate such laws of the universe as "we must usually take life as we find it."

> Traditional tales, such as *legends*, *myths*, and *folktales* are authorless and come to us by oral transmission. All mean to entertain—which is always the best way to teach. *Legends* are inauthentic history, figures, and events from the past reshaped to serve the special purposes of their tellers. *Myths*, which sometimes involve the supernatural, represent the inalterable, often insoluble principles that govern the human condition. *Folktales* are usually cautionary narratives designed to pass on knowledge and attitudes necessary to survival.

The myth of Narcissus, who drowns while admiring his image in a pool, is an allegory for the dangers of self-involvement. Rather than instructing

us to respect bodies of water, or to restrict self-examination, the myth gleefully dramatizes what happens when someone does not pay attention to his surroundings.

Myth, by nature fatalistic and much concerned with transgression or bad judgment, reminds us how the laws of the universe work. Greek mythology is really the complex history of a huge, aberrant, and dysfunctional family.

Fables and *folktales* are often teaching stories whose job is to impart survival skills and commonsense values to the young. Most are capable of multiple interpretations, but you could say that "The Pied Piper of Hamelin" is a German tale warning about the dangers of leadership; "Robin Hood" is a brazen folk hero whose doings are meant to delight and embolden the powerless; "Rapunzel" deals with sexual awakening and a girl's drive to get her Prince; "Handsel and Gretel" explores what it means to be unwanted and lost; while "Beauty and the Beast" is—if you identify with the Beast—about finding a mate when you're no oil painting.

INTERPRETING ORAL TALES

Orally transmitted tales generally carry more complex subtexts than the homily assigned them in children's books. For example, the Italian "Doralice" by the fifteenth-century Giovanni Francesco Straparola, is about a king whose dying wife tells him to marry again, but only to a woman whose finger fits her ring. Their daughter proving to have the only finger that fits it, the king wants to marry her. This tale is in fact one of a class that deals with father-daughter incest. It makes the princess's husband punish the lascivious king, but in other, similar stories the daughter is recommended to submit, since a father during the Middle Ages held ultimate authority in the family.

As poetic allegories, the stories often carry multiple meanings, and the wisdom embedded in their subtexts often makes them interesting for a modern adaptation.

ADAPTATION PROBLEMS

Watch that the moral lesson in your choice of tale doesn't blind you to problems of adaptation. Many traditional tales hinge on the effects of a magic potion, obedience to some archaic custom, or submission to the will of a tyrannical parent. Transferred wholesale to the present day, these will strain your audience's willingness to *suspend disbelief*. Though you could imbue the entire world of the story with the convenient properties of magical realism, the assignment asks for a good story set in a world running under familiar rules.

You may have to look hard for the modern embodiment of these situations. Say your tale calls for a self-destructively obedient daughter: Where can this be found? Try a fundamentalist immigrant father, formerly tortured as a political prisoner, who now makes extreme demands on his family. And if your myth calls for a magic potion, you can solve it by making reckless teenagers pop pills at a party, or having an anthropologist sample a shaman's concoction as part of his research. Ingenuity can solve most problems.

ASSIGNMENTS

Assignment 13-1: Free Choice of Tale

Choose your own material but don't stop at something that merely illustrates your thematic interests. Find a myth, legend, or folktale that you can adapt to a recognizably modern setting and that appeals to you at a visceral level. By giving rein to your instincts and fascinations, most especially those you cannot explain, you engage deeper and more significant preoccupations. If your own ethnic background is mixed, you may find it rather satisfying to research for a legend, folktale, or myth from among the least familiar aspects of your own background. For me this would mean foraging among Celtic and Hispanic tales before resorting to the familiar ones from my English upbringing.

Make up a presentation portfolio, which should include:
- A photocopy of the original tale.
- A brief summary of its content
- Your new version written in the usual treatment form. It should include,
  - A modern setting whose conventions are credible for a present-day story (meaning, no magic potions, vanishing genies, or haunted shopping carts).
  - Believable characters, credibly motivated.
  - A plot that doesn't strain credulity.

Analysis

Define briefly what your story is meant to convey about:

a. The constants of human behavior
b. The way things work in the world.

Assignment 13-2: Myth

Same as Assignment 13-1, but instead of a free choice, use only a myth.

Assignment 13-3: Legend

Same as Assignment 13-1, but instead of a free choice, use only a legend.

Assignment 13-4: Folktale

Same as Assignment 13-1, but instead of a free choice, use only a folktale.

DISCUSSION

Your critical comments as you consider other people's choice and handling of this assignment might focus on:

- The nature of a work's impact as a story.
- Is its central figure a flat or a round character in the modern version?
- What you think the story signifies, especially in its subtexts. What is it trying to say about the trials and choices of living?
- What structure it takes and what point of view.
- Options you can see for developing its potential.

Also,

- How is the central character portrayed (strong, weak, funny, loved, misunderstood, etc.)?
- What kind of experience does the central character have?
- Can you see a turning point in the story? What makes it so?
- Does anyone change or grow from the experiences described?
- Were there any striking images, and what did they contribute to the story's meaning?

If you review more than one story:

- Can you see any common denominators or interesting contrasts between stories?
- What part did action and what part did dialogue play in the stories?
- Which story was the most unusual and why?

EXAMPLES (IN RESPONSE TO ASSIGNMENT 13-1)

Example 1: *The Legend of Pretty Boy Floyd Retold* (Michael Hanttula)

A spring night. The wealthy man, P. B. Floyd, driving an expensive sports car, races through the back streets of a suburb to avoid the police car that patrols the main strips. Returning from the shipyard, where he has just completed refinishing the deck of his boat, his tattered jeans and stained shirt desecrate the fine leather seat that they rest on.

Out of the darkness of an alleyway: a blur of spinning red and blue lights angers P. B., and his fist slams against the steering wheel as he pulls his "workday shoe"–covered foot from the accelerator. Pulling over, P. B. begins to prepare the documents that the officer will look for. Reaching for his wallet, P. B. finds an empty pocket and an officer staring down his throat.

He tries to explain, but the officer doesn't trust someone dressed like he is. P. B. is asked to step out of the car—still trying to explain. The officer becomes infuriated with P. B. for attempting to lie his way out of this and calls for backup. P. B. explains that this isn't necessary and the argument heats up. The officer rails at P. B. for insulting his intelligence and barks about his hatred for what criminals like him have done to the city. P. B. continues his attempt to justify himself, but the officer finally replies with a baton blow to the head. Finding himself on the ground and disoriented, P. B. struggles to stop the officer from beating him. The officer does not relent. As the baton meets his stomach, P. B. is able to grab hold, and he holds on for his life.

The officer becomes even more enraged and threatens him with the consequences as he unleashes his service revolver. Without thought of his action, P. B. pulls forcefully on the baton and then strikes it back in the officer's direction, trying to shake it free. The baton snaps back into the officer's face. With a crack into his nose, the officer's cartilage is forced into his brain, and his corpse collapses next to P. B. Sirens are approaching from a mile or so away as P. B. realizes what he has done.

He flees, taking all the money he has with him, into the mountains. Witnesses have described P. B., and he is never

> able to return to a well-populated area. A slew of crimes following the officer's murder, as well as a few that occurred before (all without suspects), are assumed to have been the work of the malicious P. B. Floyd, who "murdered an officer without thought when pulled over for a routine traffic violation." Now he is the most feared and hated criminal in the state, held responsible for more crimes than this region has ever known.
>
> P. B. lives in solitude and almost never makes contact with others, let alone commits any crimes. He does, however, donate what money he can to charities he formerly supported when he lived within the good grace of the town. Each time he sends only an unmarked packet filled with bills.

The author writes:

> I guess this story speaks of mistaken identity. P. B. is never allowed to return because of the identity the town has given him, so he must leave everything behind and become a hermit—or face conviction and be incarcerated. P. B. is fairly innocent, but witnesses would say that it was he who had attacked the officer. In a police-controlled society, the might of the officer's duty makes what is right: it gives the officer the right to act violently, but not the citizen the right to protect him/herself. Once someone is condemned by the state, the people of that state will also condemn that person, feeling as if that person's actions against the state have been made against them personally as well.
>
> When condemned initially, a person is also likely to be accused as an all-around evil person—whether through accusations of other actual crimes (as in the legend of Pretty Boy Floyd) or in having a criminal mind (so that criminal actions equate with an evil mentality). As far as my themes are concerned, I seem to deal with stories of misunderstood characters, or the (re)actions that come from misunderstandings. This seems to be a case of wrongful guilt placed upon P. B. that has sentenced him to a lifetime of solitude.

Every story that you or anyone produces will need further development. How to make this happen? In this story, the foreground events need some *backstory* (see the sidebar) to establish local police behavior and the life

of the town. Without this, we won't realize that Pretty Boy Floyd is not simply spoiled and resentful by nature but is the victim of prejudice and ill treatment.

After the killing, the narrative probably must branch into two stories, told in parallel segments: One follows Floyd in his developing solitude, the other shows town life with other crimes being committed that the townspeople conveniently ascribe to him in his absence. That he always gave anonymously to charities will need establishing early, if the anonymous gifts from his hideout are to have their rightful weight by the movie's end.

> *Backstory* is information about the past that the audience gleans as the story proceeds. Backstory concerns events and situations that led the story's characters into their present attitudes and situations. *Editorializing* is the sin of making backstory or authorial attitudes emerge blatantly, from "planted" dialogue: "Ah, there you are, Alan. And you've just been to visit your father, who bought a share in the mine in 1962."

This story falls under the rubric of "give a dog a bad name," for it illustrates how class or racial stereotyping shackle a person to a troublesome label. Class antagonism on the officer's part seems the cause, because Floyd is good looking and wealthy. He has to be on guard, because the police will harass him. Pride and irritability are his Achilles' heel. Perhaps he is like Rodney King, the Los Angeles African American who refused to stop for a police car and whom the police beat unmercifully. Like King, P. B. refuses to play the subordinate and must eventually pay for his independence. Killing his tormentor leads inevitably to exile and to becoming a convenient scapegoat for all unsolved crimes.

We might say "Serves him right," except that in his solitude he still finds ways to relieve the suffering of others. Unlike his precursor Robin Hood, his actions go unknown and unrewarded, and so he more than redeems himself.

Example 2 (Tatsuya Guillermo Ohno)

Southern Japan, a small village. Joshi is a well-known architect and a religious person. He has built numerous churches, all of them in a very traditional style, with a round straight tree placed to support the ceiling at the center of each church. It symbolizes the strength and unity of each believer. A week after he has finished his latest church, the priest tells Joshi that the central tree has a hole and is infected.

Leaving the tree in that condition would weaken the tree and the church would fall down. Also the other wood

> in the church could become infected and become weaker and weaker until it too fell apart. Knowing the dangers, Joshi starts a search party who walk into the middle of the forest.
>
> It is very hot and humid, but the party keeps searching for a tree. They sleep in the forest and the search starts early in the morning. Days go by and they still can't find a tree. Every single one they find is infected and full of holes. Everyone is exhausted but still they keep looking. One night after a week of looking, the search is canceled. First thing in the morning everyone packs to go home, but Joshi doesn't give up and goes on searching for the right tree. The forest is very dark. The moon is the only thing he can see. He can hardly see the trees at all.
>
> Just before dawn he decides to go back but as he returns he bumps into a big, big tree. He is amazed by the size of it, at how perfectly round and straight it is. The sun comes up and he sees that there are no holes in it and that it isn't infected. The search party returns to cut the tree down and with the help of all the villagers the tree is dragged to the village.

The author writes:

> The story is about unity. The tree represents unity and in this case the main support. Although the search was exhausting, the entire party worked hard looking for the tree. Hope encouraged Joshi to go on looking one more time for the tree, so the story is also about hope, which is the last thing we have to lose.

This fairly straightforward story, which does not seem quite modernized enough to entirely fulfill the assignment, is about faith and persistence. Its hero Joshi, famous for his art and religiousness, has become too comfortable with success and is now a little careless. Tatsumo's draft of the story could be accused of having an overevident moral. Actually, some vital elements are missing, but they are not hard to find.

Interrogating a story. To test a plot, search it for implausibilities and omissions. This is done well by a sympathetic group, who become the story's first audience. If the author is to learn all that's possible, he or she must listen carefully to the responses and not leap to defend or explain.

You develop an idea by *interrogating* it—that is, by asking all the hard, valid questions that a skeptical audience might pose, and by examining the possible answers for their guidance. For instance:

Q: *How does the priest come to report the tree's failure to Joshi*?
A: Maybe with pain and disbelief, suggesting that the new church is literally rotten at the core and Joshi must rectify the disaster.

Q: *How does Joshi react*?
A: Perhaps with anger or disbelief until convinced that his work is indeed faulty. It is always useful to make a character's path more difficult and to put more resistance and tension into situations.

Q: *How does Joshi atone for his mistake*?
A: After seeing that he has failed, he must accept that it happened through pride and overconfidence. Dramatically speaking, this clears the stage for a moral epiphany later.

Q: *How does he tell the villagers*?
A: The priest could offer to tell them on Joshi's behalf, but it would be more powerful if Joshi told them himself. This would start him on the path of self-inflicted humility. In dramatic terms it is "raising the stakes," an expression that comes from gambling games when players stand to win or lose larger sums.

> *Raising the stakes*. Whenever you find ways to intensify a character's obstacles, you make that character "play for higher stakes." This generates a stronger dramatic experience, because characters struggle all the harder when winning or losing is so significant. Conflict and struggle are at the heart of drama.

Q: *How does he get the villagers to follow him into the forest*?
A: Perhaps they first make him search alone. When he fails, he must return to humbly ask their support.

Q: *Where is God when Joshi, who thinks he has paid his dues as a worshiper, needs him*?
A: As the main character Joshi must vanquish his faults to prove himself a hero. But heroes aren't heroes unless severely tested. By applying the conventions that go with a type or *genre* of story, and by asking a series of natural questions, a host of developmental possibilities begin to appear. *Genre*, the French word for type or class, is the name given to a type of story. To label a story a buddy story, comedy *noir*, western, historical romance, biography, epic, melodrama, or science-fiction film is to call upon audience expectations that are in fact useful. Depending on taste, an author can either fulfill that audience's expectations or go some way along the expected path—only to veer off unexpectedly in another direction at a plot point.

Using a genre permits a degree of shorthand by providing stock elements such as the timing and sequencing of slapstick comedy, the drawn-out tension of the thriller, or the low-key night setups and melancholy of *film noir*. Most stories fall into a genre, so each calls up a range of audience expectations that the story can confirm or undermine. The world a genre promises even helps to draw in the right audience.

> *A genre* refers to a type or family of artwork. Romantic comedy, documentary, and film noir are screen genres; blues, hard rock, symphonies, and jazz are genres of music.

A genre also limits what you do, though not unreasonably so. While you don't expect Felix the Cat to stroll through a biblical scene, you are welcome in our postmodern world to combine or subvert genres. When we gravitate toward what we like, we also hope it will contain something revolutionary. Film critics wearied by the repetition of cinematic formulae are excellent at genre spotting, and the industry trade paper *Variety* has raised ironic pigeonholing to an art form.

Example 3: *Sisyphus Cries Dixie: A Modern Story* (Michelle Arnove)

On a deserted street just off the center of town in New Orleans, lies a beat up, half-burned-down building. Echoes from the Mardi Gras celebration going on a few blocks away shake the tattered stairs and walls of 13 Stone Hill Street. Three men occupy a room on the tired fourth floor. Two of them stand stiffly next to either side of the door. A large, well-manicured man named Æsopus sits center floor in a large chair behind a wooden table. Sisyphus, a muscular man in his early 20s enters the room and sits on the end of the table with great confidence.

Æsopus, a formidable father figure to the "crawfish cavalry"—a local money laundering group—explains his family plight to Sisyphus. His daughter Ægina has eloped with Jupiter, a man known as a bad-news gambler about town. Sisyphus, a freelance journalist, is married to Harouka, the daughter of an extremely wealthy Arabian prince. Since Sisyphus belongs to the country club and socializes with many in these circles, Æsopus thinks that Sisyphus might have information on his daughter's whereabouts. He thinks she was taken against her will and offers to compensate Sisyphus in exchange for the facts. Æsopus does not want to go to the local police due to his long-standing judicial

differences of opinion over criminal operations. Lacking no wealth, Sisyphus prefers to be given a bottle of vintage wine from Æsopus's infamous wine cellar. Æsopus agrees to this but warns Sisyphus of pitfalls in the situation.

Since entrusting Sisyphus with his fears for his daughter, Sisyphus "must come through or else." "Or else what?" responds Sisyphus. Æsopus will send his main man after him—Pluto, who runs Æsopus's bottle-capping company. A factory down in the lower end of town, the company is a sorry excuse for an encapsulated sweat shop. As it turns out, Pluto's top man, whom they call Death, has been in the hospital due to a golf cart accident with Sisyphus. They had been playing a round of golf, and Death was ahead in his game but fell from the golf cart on the way to the next hole. Word had it that Sisyphus, angry that he might lose, pushed Death from the cart as they were cruising at top speed across the putting green. Death ended up with a broken arm, broken leg, and fractured vertebrae. Pluto is not happy about this incident.

Æsopus makes an agreement with Sisyphus that if he does not capture Jupiter and Ægina and bring them back to good ole' New Orleans, Sisyphus will have to go to work for Æsopus under Pluto. The deal is on . . . until time runs out. Sisyphus tells his wife of the arrangement he made with Æsopus. He asks her to contact her father to help him out. Disgusted with Sisyphus's continuous trouble-making schemes, the wife runs away with Pluto's cousin, Erilias.

Sisyphus fails and has no choice but to go to work for Æsopus under Pluto's command. After a week at the factory in the posh back offices, Sisyphus cons Pluto into letting him off for a few days to find his wife and Erilias. He heads for the country club first, and finds himself engaged in a round of golf three hours later. His friends, happy to see him, drag him out first to dinner and later to a dance club. One of his friends, Olympus, offers him a job as caretaker on his private island and offers keys to the estate and all its treasures. Sisyphus, without hesitation, snatches the opportunity.

Three years later, as he lounges on the empty beach, a yacht bearing Æsopus and Pluto arrives nearby. At gunpoint, they take Sisyphus back to the States.

The factory, now more run-down than ever, continues to manufacture bottles and caps. Sisyphus is demoted from his previous posh position under Pluto to low man on the

> bottle-capping assembly line. Here the bottles never stop lining up and the bins of caps runneth over.
>
> Every evening, Sisyphus is taken to a dorm-style room and is watched over by Pluto's security guards. This is his destiny . . . to be for evermore a bottle capper.

The author writes:

> As I could never come close to the original magical *Myth of Sisyphus*, understanding Camus's reflective comment on how human beings are the masters of their own fate is somewhat complex. However, I will give it a try.
>
> The original myth points to a number of notions about humankind and destiny. First, I would say that Camus is trying to point out that we are responsible for our own actions and bring about our own destiny through indirect self-deprecating actions. In other words, sometimes we take for granted what we have and then must test the truth of its existence, losing in the process. Sisyphus had all that he needed, but was tempted with more. When he tested his possessions, he lost all that he enjoyed. Given an opportunity for redemption, he once again tested his ownership of his goods and ended up far worse off.
>
> The other defining point of the myth is the notion of repetition and counter-progression as a living hell. Maybe my own beliefs in variety, growth, and progression as the primary needs for happiness in life leave me with the feeling that destitution and "hell," as we'd have it, is doing the same thing, day in and day out, with no satisfactory outcome. To spend one's life doing meaningless, menial, laborious activities and never seeing any change or growth, either in oneself or the objects of one's focus, equates to nothingness, especially when one's life is ruled by another person and choices are not elements in the equation.

The setting—Mafiosi in a run-down New Orleans backwater—is replete with atmospheric possibility. It is a world where women and younger males are property and where the godfather deals out assignments that may garner promotion or punishment.

I wish the author had used modern names, as the ancient ones keep me from sinking completely into the story. However, we do have a good beginning and a good ending (Sisyphus drearily capping bottles for eternity). Condemning Sisyphus to eternal factory labor is the author's equivalency to the mythical figure repeatedly trying to roll his rock uphill. Our Sisyphus, too,

fails from overconfidence and inattention to the dangers of his task. Since this will be his fate, it would be nice to make him, on entering the situation as a carefree young journalist, see something that *foreshadows* his destiny. Myths often turn our expectations on their head. Since Sisyphus is the hero, we expect him to win. But the story has a sting in its tail, and by making him fail, it focuses our attention on the faults or vulnerabilities that ensure this.

> *Foreshadowing*—literally the shadow that falls ahead of us when we walk away from the sun—is a narrative device that lets the audience (and sometimes the character, if perceptive) glimpse what will befall him.

The outline has a couple of missing links. Why does Sisyphus fail to find Ægina? How does Æsopus's wife become pivotal to Sisyphus's failure? In the original myth, Zeus has Æsopus's daughter plucked away by an eagle. Sisyphus happens to see the abduction and makes the tactical mistake of snitching on Zeus, who consigns him to his eternal punishment. Because of this he fails to help the dispossessed father. The chain of causality would need mending for the next draft.

DISCUSSION

Heraclitus said that "character is destiny." The above adaptations—from an American legend, a Japanese folktale, and a Greek myth—deal with characters whose fates pivot on their innate qualities. Joshi, after truly signifying humility, triumphs; Pretty Boy, though outlawed, holds on to his humanity; and Sisyphus screws up and falls victim to endless and dehumanizing toil. As you make your bed, so you lie. Michael Roemer, whose *Telling Stories* is cited at the end of this chapter, believes that a story's plot represents the laws of the universe, and that the characters who catch our imagination are usually those who flaunt those laws by seeking to fulfill their desires and ambitions. Because civilization depends on people of goodwill acting for the benefit of the majority, we are perennially interested in what makes characters tick, what actions they take that merit good or bad fortune, and what influences the justice meted out by Fate. Two of our characters merely survive, because they make bad judgments, overestimate their abilities, or otherwise fail to adapt to reality. One (Joshi) sees reality but refuses to accept that God can really want

> The *Hero's Journey* is what the folklorist Joseph Campbell calls the narrative pattern he found underlying most of the world's folktales. Hollywood covered similar ground by studying audiences and box office receipts. What Campbell saw was male dominated and omitted the fact that heroines make journeys through life, too.

him defeated, so he obstinately goes on searching. God's message—to the villagers and to us—is that faith and persistence will ultimately be rewarded.

What is fascinating is that all three authors (unknowingly, I think) tell stories that enact what the folklorist Joseph Campbell believed was a universal structure. He called it the hero's journey. His *Hero with a Thousand Faces* shows that in the archetypical trajectory:

- The hero is seen first in a world familiar to him.
- He receives a call to action that often involves a mission.
- Often he first refuses the call.
- The call is repeated in a more urgent and ineluctable form.
- Reluctantly accepting the challenge, the hero passes into a new and unfamiliar world.
- Along the path, he/she faces a series of increasingly severe tests of courage, ingenuity, persistence, faith, etc.
- During these tests he/she meets a variety of helpers and hinderers—allies, counselors, tricksters, and enemies—some helping, others making matters more complex and difficult.
- There is usually a mentor from whom to learn.
- Approaching the ultimate problem, he faces the supreme test.
- Passing the supreme test means getting the supreme reward (often the elixir of knowledge).
- Resurrection. Tested and strengthened, he returns to the normal world bearing the elixir of wisdom.

Guess what? This is quite similar to the three-act structure discussed earlier. If you have seen Peter Jackson's epic Tolkien trilogy, any of the Harry Potter films, or any Disney feature, the stages of the hero's journey will be familiar enough. In the early twentieth century Hollywood's immigrant moguls quickly discovered from their box-office returns the strength and durability of traditional forms, especially when transposed into the modern day. The medieval troubadours and companies of roving actors must have had a similar experience. Of course, Campbell's limitation is that he sees only heroes.

GOING FARTHER

The Internet is a rich source of fairy tales and other traditional stories. By entering a title and two or three key words into a search engine, you can locate any number of fascinating interpretations for each.

Caution: Use the books in the list below to assist you in rethinking something you have already written, never as a starting point for a new idea. Otherwise, you risk paralysis from trying to write within a constricting plan.

Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 2nd ed. Fine Creative Media, 1996. (A classic cross-cultural study that examines the archetypal hero in light of modern psychological ideas. Using fairytale narratives of many cultures, Campbell discusses the three stages of the heroic journey—departure, initiation, and return—and a lot more besides.

Roemer, Michael. *Telling Stories: Postmodernism and the Invalidation of Traditional Narrative*. Rowman & Littlefield, 1995. (Roemer is a filmmaker and film teacher with a background in philosophy. His book is a radical, passionate, and highly sophisticated exposition of the ancient roots of storytelling, and a defense of them against the depredations of deconstructivist theory.)

Vogler, Christopher. *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Storytellers and Screenwriters*, 2nd ed. Michael Wiese Productions, 1998. (This work is deeply indebted to Joseph Campbell's work and shows how closely the folklorist's paradigm fits Dorothy's career in *The Wizard of Oz* as well as those of hundreds of other screen heroes and heroines.)

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14

Dream Story

The work in this chapter invites you to break completely with a major writing enemy—overcontrol. Of course, writing cannot happen without *some* control, but as we have said, following the rigid patterns of composition instilled by an overmethodical education can easily render your first stages of composition stillborn.

> *Writing is a two-part process.* Generate new material fast and intuitively so you can keep up with your mind's inventions. Then edit, using your powers of analysis and restructuring. Never wear both hats at once; it overheats the brain and leads to self-censorship and writer's block.

Write in private, and write with utter abandon so you set down whatever comes into your head. Then you can see what your mind produces when freed of self-censorship. Normally it moves with complete freedom only when you are asleep and dreaming, and this chapter aims to explore what it can create. If you record your dreams over a period of months or years, your thematic preoccupations will emerge—along with your demons, archetypes, and unfinished business in life. What more could a storyteller ask?

> *Being true to the distinctive logic of dream* is a rehearsal for being true to the way things really happen in life, which is seldom as we expect. What many people call writing from imagination is really writing from a memory stuffed with clichés. Evict them by staying close to the sheer oddity of the real.

The transcribed dreams in your dream journal will probably exemplify principles that are important to anyone working in the arts, namely:

- Emotionally loaded dream narrative is open, sparse, visual, and nonliteral.
- An open story invites the audience to decompress it by recreating what the narrative implies but withholds.
- Vital elements often arrive in confusing juxtaposition, but subsequently prove to be not random, but nonlinear.
- Putting tension and tone ahead of logic reflects how we experience pressured situations.
- Dreams and poetry require us to ponder their ambiguities until we penetrate and therefore remember their meanings.
- Dialogue that is brief during a flow of action raises the value of language.
- Dialogue that is more than minimal devalues words.

Withholding information means delaying answers to your audience's questions, postponing closure, and thus maintaining tension. Profound messages usually make us work to get their meaning, and we never forget anything that took hard work to attain.

ASSIGNMENTS

Assignment 14-1: Writing Up a Dream

Use the material of a dream and, most importantly, preserve dreaming's weird logic. You will be surprised at what's waiting for you there. So, from the journal of dreams that you have been keeping:

1. Write a treatment for a story that might last, say, five minutes onscreen.
2. Do not worry about a tidy beginning or ending, or about conventional story logic. Instead, be as faithful as possible to the mood and jagged logic of dream itself.
3. Feel free to alter or augment in order to serve the spirit of the dream world as you know it.
4. Define what themes or messages the story seems to be developing.

Assignment 14-2: Surreal Narrative

Take several strong images from dreams and use them as key frames. Now, using your imagination,

1. Weave them together with a linking first-person narration, preserving as much as possible of the zany logic of dream.
2. You can develop what starts off as a still image into dynamic movement if you wish.
3. Define what themes or messages the story seems to be developing.

Assignment 14-3: Linking Dreams into One Narrative

Follow instructions for Assignment 14-1 but use two or more dreams and make adjustments to their content so they form a seamless narrative with, say, three scenes.

Assignment 14-4: Dream and Myth

Write up an interesting dream, then

1. Compare it with the nearest myth that you can find.
2. Explore the similarities and the differences between the two in an essay.
3. Say what meaning your dream seems to suggest, and how you might solidify this.

DISCUSSION

Seeing a good film is often like dreaming, and dreams are often very cinematic and rich with structural and symbolic possibilities. The surrealist genre of painting and filmmaking in the 1920s and 1930s was influenced by advances in psychology and interested in how the subconscious expresses itself through dreaming. The artists believed that dreams expressed important ideas through myth and metaphor.

As you discuss the dream assignments, try to,

- Be aware of the dream's structure. Where is the story's crisis?
- Who are the principal characters? Are they flat or round, and what do they represent?
- What form is the dream taking and what is the nearest myth or folktale?
- Has the writer implied a meaning, and do you agree with it?
- What are the most daring and dreamlike aspects of the work?

> *Dreams offer an interpretation* of the chaotic, surreal experience we call our waking life. They do it poetically using story, symbol, and metaphor.

EXAMPLES (IN RESPONSE TO ASSIGNMENT 14-1)

Dream Sequence 1 (Chris Darner)

An average-looking man in unassuming clothing is led along a path, carved into a sheer sea cliff. In front of him a short, crooked man keeps up a brisk pace. The average man slows and sputters in his walk, staring out at the vastness of everything around him. Below the two travelers is a deep-green ocean, its waves crashing up far below them, a salty white mist rising into the air. The two continue on the narrow trail, the crooked man constantly pulling and tugging at the average man. The path bends up ahead and the crooked man pulls more eagerly than ever, increasing the pace to a near jog.

As the path curves around the cliff, land comes into view—lush tropical vegetation and a white-sand beach. The average man scans the new view and his pace slows. The crooked man doesn't notice, however, and continues on his brisk pace, leaving the average man slowly drifting farther behind. The average man continues his scanning, stumbling along the trail. His eyes catch a small raft floating down below in the sea. He holds up his hand to shade his eyes and help him focus in the bright light. Slowly the image comes into focus. There are two brothers frolicking in the water. They both look very similar and could very likely be twins. They have plain, muted features, appear to be about 25 years old and are extremely obese. Wearing nothing but small bathing suits, their bodies resemble white walruses, their flesh rippling with every movement. The average man can hear faint echoes of their laughing and giggling mixed with the sounds of the crashing waves still below him. The two brothers chuckle and chortle, playing in and around the raft. They take turns pulling their massive frames up into their small boat and then falling back off the side of the raft, which folds and stresses under their weight. The average man sits there stunned, his movement along the path having halted seconds into the observation.

The crooked man returns and curtly pulls at the average man, though not out of spite. The average man stumbles along the path, once again following the crooked man. He glances back one last time, hears the twins playing on the raft, then twists around to follow the crooked man, who is leading as eagerly as ever.

The author writes:

> This dream sequence seems to develop upon a theme outside my current theme list but does touch upon one. The main theme of the piece is alienation and being somewhere intimidating and foreign. The crooked man pulls the average man along, because he is either unable to maneuver in the unfamiliar territory, or is hesitant. When the average man sees the brothers he stops and watches them. While I didn't write in his internal reactions to the situation, they hopefully read as uncomfortable, and that he somehow feels it is indecent. This response, and anywhere you are uncomfortable with people around you, does touch partially on my theme of fear of either being or becoming that which you hate. In other words, the average man sees something in the brothers that he sees, or could see, in himself.
>
> My themes have been finding their way into my writings, both inside of class and out, fairly consistently. One theme that I do notice in my writings is alienation and a feeling of being somewhere forbidden or taboo. This dream sequence illustrates that fairly well.

Although imagery is rendered quite minimally, the visual texture of this dream is stark and vivid. Of the four characters, three are physically deformed. The crooked man is the average man's guide, a sort of stunted Father Time, bustling their shared journey forward. A polarity between ends and means is implied because the old man is wholly focused on the purpose of the journey, while the average man wants to linger and gaze around him. As he takes in the natural and beautifully evoked seascape, his gaze is captured by the two fat, white walrus boys. Their play is repulsively fascinating, and he goes on watching voyeuristically until chivvied by his guide. These twin souls are a phenomenon that he feels he must not dwell on, yet he cannot help looking back at them over his shoulder as the crooked man tugs him onward. From the author's notes, the average man seems to be witnessing his own worst fate—pale obesity with only another version of himself for companionship.

Dream Sequence 2 (Michael Hanttula)

> An immaculately clear sky, radiant blue. Tall grass that has been worn to a light brown by the beaming sun sways playfully in the cool breeze. A trail stretches far across this land, snuggled between a long body of water and rolling

hills. It is absolutely quiet, except for the grasses, which seem to snicker as they rub against each other. There is a group of young men hiking along this mountainous trail. The sun is beating down on them, browning them like the grass, and the calm expanse of the dark lake beckons them to divert their path. They pause and contemplate a swim when their attention is stolen by a curious crack in an enormous boulder behind them.

One of the men investigates the crack, which is formed by a large stone plate that seems to be slowly dismembering itself from the larger portion of rock. Behind this plate, the man finds a small opening that leads inside the boulder. The rest of the group, increasingly curious, join the young man.

> *Character archetypes*, as symbolic and unindividualized as Tarot cards, often appear in dreams. They are either hardwired in our genetics or instilled by our culture. *Narrative structural archetypes* also seem inherent to our minds. How else could dreams, mostly so fragmentary and random, sometimes perfectly exemplify a narrative tradition?

They cautiously creep inside this enormous rock to find a stone-walled room, with an abundance of ceiling height for what it lacks in floor space. It could have been an antechamber to a medium-sized pyramid. There is a large stone statue of an indiscernible figure standing before them, draped in a dark gray and black linen; it watches them, it watches who enters. A dark tunnel streams off to the right; it is not very inviting. They find the lengthy doorway-like hole to the left of the figure much more appealing.

In a bit of a nervous fright over a possible forthcoming adventure, they scurry through the length of the "doorway." Three enormous stone slabs slam down behind them—meant to trap them individually. Now in a new room, they find a large pit taking up a good area of the floor before them. Its depth is unknown, for it beams an intense light upward. The high ceiling is surprisingly dark given the intensity of the light. Returning from the heights of the ceiling down the length of the near wall are three gigantic stained-glass windows with gothic arches and no particular design, yet apparently medieval. On the ground, the group discovers a plenitude of odd-shaped stones. Some resemble religious objects—crosses and ankhs. The friends decide that they have

had enough of this adventure and pick up the stones to beat out the stained glass windows. One of the windows "pops" out of its molding and slips outward. The ground below is now a few hundred feet down. Looking out of this new portal, they see old-growth redwoods that have grown past the height of their view. This exit is not an option.

Turning back toward the room, they see a small ledge on one side of the gleaming crater. They shimmy their way across to the other side, fearful of plummeting to its possible depths. As they reach the other side, they are met by a small cliff (of about three feet or so) that is topped with a fairly severe incline. The only way out seems farther within. They attempt to climb this subterranean hill but find that its composition is of such loose dirt that their arms are buried to the shoulders by the time they can manage a grip. Just as it seems impossible, one of the group discovers another way out, a passage to the right side. They hurry through the tunnel and find themselves landing on the edge of a pool.

A white-bottomed pool with bright lights illuminating it, one you might find in a suburban residence, yet underground. Floating in the pool are dozens of severed human appendages, mostly full arms and legs. Yet the pool's water is clear. One of the boys jumps in and swims safely to the other side. Following his lead, the others jump in. Just as they do, a large dragon's head that the boys hadn't seen before emerges from a far side of this medium-sized pool. It's red, with fiery eyes, made from durable plastic. One may have seen its like at an amusement park. Opening its mouth to toast the group with flames, it coats the clustering youths with a fine watery spray. They hop out of the pool, happy to be alive and beaming with adrenaline. The room continues on one side, apparently naturally formed pillars leading off into the darkness. However, on the other side is the tunnel they had seen before in the antechamber. They rush through it, laughing at the statue as they make their way out the boulder's entrance. Enraged by their lack of respect, the statue transforms into a human, shielded by a box over her head, and chases them away.

The author writes:

> It's rather difficult to find any overwhelming themes or direct purpose to this dream, but it does seem to deal with adventure, religion, mortality, and the bond between

> friends. Odd, because this was a recurring dream that I once had with each new set of friends, and have not had since the last time that I had a unified "group" of friends.
>
> It seems as if my interests, thematically speaking, have been expanded to also include: the loss of innocence, alienation, and the conflict of wanting to "do good" in a corrupt environment.

This dream was written out as one big, formless paragraph, so I have taken the liberty of inserting paragraph breaks. This makes it easier to read, and reveals important shifts between stages. Make no mistake, this astonishing dream is a textbook example of the hero's journey and its symbols. So often dreams are fragmentary and illogical, but close analysis of this one shows the following structure.
Consider:

Act I

- The sunburned young gods amid the trail/sun/water/hills of normal life.
- The call to adventure in the cracked rock with its passageway leading into the hill.
- The first chamber guarded by the draped stone figure. The problem is to get past the gatekeepers and penetrate to the heart of the catacomb.

Act II

- A one-way passage leading to the second chamber containing religious symbols/church windows/blinding light from (hell?) below.
- From here, there are at first two blocked routes of escape.
- But a third way leads to the third and inmost cavern.
- Escape from the inner cave is only possible via the supreme test—passing through the pool of severed limbs.

Act III

- Finally they must run the gauntlet of the statue that comes to life, an enraged maternal female that chases them blindfolded, like the figure of Justice.

For the band of friends the lightly undertaken journey into the hill, with its three caverns, and the return proves to be a supreme test of endurance, courage, and collaborative problem solving. Facing the terror and mysteries of the journey, but emerging unharmed through cooperation and ingenuity, they seem to prove the value of teamwork.

This journey is less one hero's journey than a collective or even generational rite of passage into manhood. Michael reports being revisited by his dream with each new group he has joined, as though his mind wants to calm his insecurities by repeating the tale. Other elements in the dream suggest preoccupations that only he could decipher, such as the veiled female guardian and the pool of severed limbs.

Dream Sequence 3 (Cynthia Merwarth)

Her arms are full of the day's worth of shopping. As she walks up to the mall exit the guard unlocks the door and lets her out. Time must have flown by because the mall seemed full to her when she was in the stores. But now the parking lot is strangely deserted—all except for her car, which looks as though it is miles away (farther than she remembered having parked it).

It is dark and the car park lights illuminate the barrenness. As she walks to her car she hears the sound of growling. Turning, she sees a pack of wild dogs coming for her at a rapid pace. The car seems so far away, but she runs quickly. The growling sounds are closer, louder, more imminent. She runs forever, always hearing the sounds of the dogs behind her. She fumbles with her keys—that particular sound seems so loud and long. The car door flies open and she tries to get in, but as she is shutting the door a dog rips at her heel, making her scream in pain. She kicks it away and slams the door shut.

Now the pack of dogs howls and encircles the car in a predatory rhythmic dance—as if they were going around a fire. Time stands still as she honks the horn again and again, trying to rouse some sign of life in the empty lot.

She is now driving and the dogs are running behind her, never losing sight of her. She can see them in the rearview mirror. The road is dirt. It is deserted. She comes to a gas station and runs out of her car looking for help.

As she runs up to the station attendant he swipes at her with his hand and tells her to "get out of here." He gestures to hit her and stomps his feet at her. She backs off, not believing his refusal to listen to what she has just been through. She is trying to tell him as fast as possible and all he is doing is running from her and trying to hit her. As she runs past an aluminum wall of the building—following the attendant—she catches a glimpse of a wild dog near her.

> She freezes with terror. The dog is sitting and proceeds to tell her that the man will not help her . . . that the man cannot understand her.
>
> Why can she understand the dog? She thinks . . . It's talking! She sees another dog in the reflection of the aluminum, where her reflection should be! She has become one of the dogs of the night.

The author writes:

> The theme that seems to be developing here is "fear of the unknown," and the realization that I am just like what scares me most. Suffering, death, and violence are all a part of the thematic content in this dream. Also, wanting answers to things that cannot be answered and the frustration and fear that goes along with that feeling.

Although the journey here is quite short in duration, it also follows a three-act evolution:

Act I

- The journey begins in the safe, normal, and sheltered world of the shopping mall.
- The gatekeeper closes the door behind her so she cannot return.
- She faces the changed world of the nighttime parking lot.

Act II

- To get to the haven of her car she must evade the "wolf" pack, which wounds her (Achilles'?) heel and nearly gets her.
- When she finds a sanctuary, a helper rejects her needs as though she were a fleeing Jew in Nazi-dominated Europe.
- The dogs, now more plainly her demons, have caught up with her again.

Act III

- Expecting to be devoured she finds that one dog talks to her and helps her. Though her own species rejects her, an enemy reveals himself a friend and mentor. Can she trust him?
- In reality's mirror she finds that she has involuntarily joined the enemy by becoming one of them.

Among the archetypes here—gatekeeper, fleeing victim, pursuing demons, a savior who washes his hands of her—there are three appearances by *shapeshifters*, protean figures who reveal themselves first in one guise then

morph into another. The garage attendant is one, the talking dog is the second. She herself becomes the third when she discovers in the mirror that she has changed into "one of the dogs of the night."

Changing from human into animal is one of the classic abilities of shapeshifters. According to Vogler[1] they are often catalysts for change. The garage attendant who should help her betrays his responsibilities and sends her out into the night. In another change of direction, or *plot point*, the dog that came to devour her becomes her mentor—another archetype—and advises her that the man cannot understand her. In the garage's polished wall she sees herself next to her fearsome canine guide and understands that she is now a dog and belongs with the outcast creatures rather than with humanity. This is why the man tried to evict her.

> The *shapeshifter* archetype can transform from one form to another. In fairy tales, a shapeshifter can become a wolf and then return to human form again. The shapeshifter's job is to confuse, lie, deceive, help, delay, or otherwise challenge the central character, and thus to raise the story's tension.

I find the ending both moving and ambiguous. That she has a calm adviser is hopeful, but that she has become what she most fears is disturbing. To press any farther would be to second-guess what the symbols mean to the writer, and we have pledged to search for story materials, not to psychoanalyze writers.

> *Analyze the dream, not the dreamer*. The separation can be a fine line, but the dream is a tale, and the dreamer a person. Analyzing the dreamer is likely to be intrusive and objectionable, and make the author feel forced into self-exposure.

GOING FARTHER

Buñuel, Luis. *My Last Sigh*. University of Minnesota Press, 2003. (The father of cinema surrealism who made some of the most contentious and dreamlike films of the twentieth century, writes candidly about his development—from boyhood in provincial Spain to his involvement in Paris with the great surrealist painters, writers, and filmmakers.)

Jung, Carl. *Man and His Symbols*. Doubleday, 1983. (Jung posited the notion of a collective unconscious, and his work dovetails with the folklorist Joseph Campbell's in distinguishing what is innate to mankind and thus culturally universal.)

1. Vogler, Christopher. *The Writer's Journey*, 2nd ed. Michael Wiese Productions, 1998.

Jung, Carl, Carl Gustav Jung, and Aniella Jaffe. *Memories, Dreams, and Reflections*. Knopf, 1989. (Jung's autobiography taken down at the end of his life.)

Koch-Sheras, Phyllis, and Amy Lemley. *The Dream Sourcebook: A Guide to the Theory and Interpretation of Dreams*, 2nd ed. McGraw Hill, 2000. (A cultural and physiological history of dreams and dreaming that instructs in recall techniques. Classifies dreams as: message; healing; problem solving and creative; mystical, visionary or "high"; completion; recurring; and lucid [where the dreamer is aware of dreaming].)

15

Adapting a Short Story

The next resource to explore is the published short story, a literary cousin to the oral tale. You are going to choose one that you could adapt as a thirty-minute film. Of course, you should never adapt anything in copyright for public performance without first securing the proper permissions, but here we are simply exploring the problems, which represent many a trap for the unwary. This chapter's goals are for you to:

- Sample the delights of the short-story form.
- Search for a tale that is already visual and cinematic.
- Locate a tale dealing with a world and themes to which you strongly resonate.
- Pick one that could make a good thirty-minute film.
- Assess the problems of adapting from a literary to a visual and behavioral medium.

Good fiction exerts a powerful hold on the reader's imagination, but this is often through literary means for which no direct screen equivalent exists. Many authors, for instance, take us inside the main character's consciousness and tell the story from an interior, subjective point of view. Writers such as Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, William Faulkner, and other far more recent "stream of consciousness" writers like to explore their characters' psychological processes and pressures from the inside. But this poses huge difficulties when you adapt their work to the screen or stage. You could, of course, make your main character talk to herself, or think aloud using "voice-over," or let her debate her situation with a confidante, but generally these are clumsy solutions. Then again, a literary work's authorial voice, and the attitudes implied by the storyteller's viewpoint, can also evade adaptation.

So consider, as you search for a story, how it would translate into images and action and whether its literary coherence depends on more interior or descriptive means. No literary story is utterly untranslatable to the screen,

but it may pose grave difficulties. That said, a story that holds special meaning for you may inspire truly imaginative solutions, for the energy to innovate usually comes from somewhere special inside.

Here is a rather exhaustive strategy for testing and preparing a story for adaptation. It takes further what we have done with "The Fisherman's Wife" (Chapter 8) and "Little Red Riding Hood" (Chapter 9). For any assignment you undertake you will probably use only portions of what follows. If you are working alone and without guidance, tackle only what is meaningful at this time. The rest will fall into place as you gain experience.

EVALUATING A STORY FOR ADAPTATION TO THE SCREEN

Initial consideration

- Photocopy the story and draw demarcation lines between scenes.
- Number the scenes and name each with a functional tag line.
- Divide the scenes into the three-act structure.
- Decide intuitively how long the story should last on the screen. Is it a ten-minute story? One of thirty minutes? Fifty minutes? Whatever timing you decide will become your target length.
- What particularly expensive resources would the film need? For this, consider what era the story is set in, and how many locations, characters, costumes, and properties (that is, special objects) it requires.
- How cinematic is the story? You can get an idea by imagining you are about to make a film for the deaf:
  - Is its dramatic content conveyed principally through action and behavior or through dialogue?
  - Could you rewrite scenes to make them more behavioral and less talky?
- Write a premise for the story. This is a brief sentence or two that defines the situation, the main character, and her problem, and that indicates the story's purpose. They are much as you see in the *TV Guide*—for example: "Two girls defy their parents to go swimming on a summer night, but only one returns. How will Hilary tell their parents that her sister has drowned?"
- Is this story really suited to adaptation to the screen—yes, or no?

If the story passes the practicality test, you can move to the next stage.

Preparation

- Cut the story into scenes and gum each to a piece of paper so you can assemble its numbered, titled scenes in a loose-leaf binder. Place a colored sheet as a marker between the acts.

- (Optional) Highlight either all dialogue or all descriptive writing, whichever is the lesser. This helps your eye distinguish between action and behavior on the one hand, and dialogue on the other.
- Make a brief synopsis, a paragraph per scene, until you have a treatment of the whole story. Remember to write in the present tense, third person, describing only what the audience might see and hear from the screen.
- How much of your treatment is visual, physical, and behavioral and how much is trying to handle internal, mental, or psychological material? This may be the point to change horses.

Timing

- Read each scene aloud, leaving time for your inner eye to see the unfolding actions.
- Log a timing for each scene, then add them all up.
- How does the total compare with your target time?
- How much compression and simplification do you face in making an adaptation?

Dramatic potential and problems

- How visually interesting and evocative is the world the story is set in?
- What does each character represent in the story's design?
- What function does each character have in the story? (Here you may see how to drop or amalgamate characters, and simplify the story.)
- The main character (MC). What,
  - Type of person is the MC?
  - Is the MC's major conflict?
  - Is the MC's main problem?
  - Obstacles prevent the MC from solving his/her problem?
  - What does the MC have at stake?

Crisis

- What is the story's crisis?
- Where would it fall in your dramatic arc?

Act I

- How economically can you establish the main character's situation onscreen? (You may be able to enter the story later than the original, and leave earlier. Indeed, every scene may benefit from "tightening" in this way.)

Act II

- How many of the story's complications do you need to use for your second act?
- How dramatic and cinematic is the story's crisis?
- If it's lacking, what can you do to enhance it?

Act III

- What is the story's resolution and how much of the original do you need?

- Point of view (POV)
  - Whose do we mostly share and why?
  - What other POVs might be important?
  - What POV and tone does the storyteller take, and will you (or even can you) incorporate it in your screen version?
- The characters' inner lives
  - Do they reach decisions internally and thus invisibly in a screen adaptation?
  - Must decision-making be verbalized, or can you transform it into credible actions?
  - If a decision must be verbalized, can it be to an existing character?
  - Or must you invent a character for the purpose? (If so, always build such characters back into earlier stages of the story or it'll become obvious they only exist to solve spot problems.)
- Development
  - Does the main character develop in some way?
  - How is this related to the story's meaning and purpose?
- Subplots
  - Must you include them, given that film adaptations usually have to abridge and simplify the original?
- Genre
  - What genre would your movie be, compared with the source story?
  - Does your choice introduce complications in adapting the story?
- Dialogue
  - How loquacious are the characters?
  - What speech can you replace by action?
  - How drastically can you condense what's said?
  - Will the author's dialogue work in the mouths of actors, or must you change it to the vernacular or bring it up to date?
- Visualization
  - What can you do to accentuate the moods of different scenes and settings?
  - Are there metaphoric or symbolic actions and objects, ones you see playing a part in the action and imagery?
  - Can you see emphasizing any special actions for their dramatic or metaphysical meaning? (For instance, in Robert Enrico's *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* [1962], which is about the leaps of imagination in the face of death, the script makes a ritual out of preparing the noose in front of the condemned man.)
- Purpose
  - What does the story have to say about human life?
  - What in your own life makes you want to commit to this story's meaning and purpose?

> *"Faithful" adaptations* from literature to film tend to miscarry because each medium has very different strengths and weaknesses. Avoid over-reverence toward the literary original and instead think hard about what the screen can deliver well or badly.

All art thrives from the pressure of limitations. These, present when you transfer a story from one medium to another, are particularly challenging if you try to be wholly faithful to the original. But should you even try, given that each medium is so different? Actually, if you try being true to the spirit of a story rather than to its specifics, restrictions in theatrical or cinematic form can actually become useful spurs to creativity. In literature the author gives privileged access to the characters' thoughts and feelings, but the screen becomes clumsy when it tries to let the audience hear the characters' thoughts and emotions.

Actually the screen is more like real life, where the closest we get to another person is from closely observing what he or she does. Using our experience and empathy, we infer their internal state from their external actions. Cinema and theater audiences do something similar when they assess the behavioral *evidence* that the film or play offers. This said, film history contains all sorts of radical experiments at rendering consciousness, and these get all the more interesting once you've tasted the difficulties yourself.

As you look for a candidate story, remember that you are searching for material that will translate well into a scene-by-scene outline for the screen. You'll recall from Chapter 12 that outlines,

- Are in brief, short-story form.
- Are written in the present tense, and third person.
- Start a fresh paragraph for each new scene (that is, with a new location or stretch of time).
- Describe only what an audience would see and hear from the screen.
- Never include characters' thoughts or technical information about the production.
- Summarize all conversations—Example: "Pablo tells Marguerite how angry he felt when he was put in the orphanage."

During your search, try anthologies from some underexplored aspect of your own regional, cultural, or ethnic background. Treat whatever calls to you with skepticism and read it more than once. As a quick litmus test, consider how well it would function as silent cinema, which in the absence of conversation depends wholly on action.

Make up a portfolio that includes

a. A photocopy of the story
b. A cover sheet giving title, name of author, and place and year of publication.
c. Your adaptation of the story presented in scene outline form.

ASSIGNMENTS

Assignment 15-1: Short Story Analysis

Write about,

a. Your interpretation of the story's premise.
b. What attracts you about the story.
c. What you think its underlying meaning will be to an audience.
d. What its cinematic and dramatic strengths are.
e. Who is the protagonist and who the antagonist (see sidebar)
f. How the main character develops.
g. Through whose POV the story is seen, and whether you could change or vary this if you wanted.

> The *protagonist* is the original Greek name for the central character with whom we *identify* and whose fortunes we follow as he or she tries to get, do, or accomplish something. The *antagonist* is whoever stands in his or her way. Usually this is another character, but whatever is in antagonistic conflict may be a group, a force in nature, or some aspect of the main character's own psyche.

Assignment 15-2: Adaptation Issues

Discuss adaptation problems such as:

a. Are the main characters' inner quest and conflicts sufficiently externalized through action? If not, how would you rectify this?
b. How are the necessary motivations and backgrounds conveyed for each character?
c. Is the main character's problem evidenced and resolved in a way that is suitable to the screen?
d. Are there remaining aspects of adaptation that need comment?

Assignment 15-3: Dramatic Breakdown

Make a list that gives for each sequence a,
Functional name (Example: "Anita cannot find her birth certificate").
Brief list of contents.
Approximate length in minutes and seconds.
Show how you would divide your sequence list into the three-act structure.
Graph the story to show the dramatic arc you envisage for it.

DISCUSSION

When you discuss other people's adaptations, consider,

- Does the story seem to reflect the interests and values of its adaptor?
- Has the adaptation made good use of its new medium?
- Is the adaptation encumbered by its origin or liberated from it?
- Has the adaptation been scaled up or down to fulfill a good thirty-minute length?
- What can you say about the central character(s)?
- Is the central character's problem clear and compelling?
- Is the crisis cinematic, that is, has it been made behavioral and evident, or is it internal and likely to evade full notice?
- Does the story deliver a development of some kind?
- Does the adaptation deliver the same level of meaning as the original? Or is it less, more, or different?

EXAMPLES

The NYU students' responses that follow are to an assignment that was originally more limited. It called only for a story summary, an interpretation of the author's underlying purpose, and a description of perceived strengths and problems. The summaries and discussions are, however, fairly concise and do, I believe, remain valuable.

Example 1: "An Encounter," from *Dubliners*, by James Joyce (Peter Riley)

Summary. The narrator of "An Encounter" is a young Irish boy bored with the monotony of school life and the Wild West games that he and his friends play in the evenings. Along with two classmates he decides to skip school and go on an adventure: a journey down to the port in Dublin, and a ferry crossing to a place called the "Pigeon House." One of the boys, fearful of reprisals, does not turn up at the appointed time. But Mahony, a tough kid armed with a slingshot, meets the narrator and the two set off on their journey.

The boys enjoy themselves down at the wharf, watching the ships, eating lunch with the sailors. They cross the river in the ferry and wander through Ringsend, buying biscuits in the local shops and chasing a stray cat through the street.

Eventually they realize they are too tired to continue their journey and rest in a field before turning back.

As the two sit there, a bizarre old man in ratty clothes passes them, then turns to come back their way. He sits down next to them and asks them about school and books, identifying the narrator as one who is a "bookworm" like himself, not one "for games" like Mahony. With a smile that reveals the gaps in his yellowed teeth, the man interrogates them about the many "sweethearts" they each must surely have. He continues, speaking about how much he admires beautiful young girls. The narrator is wary of this strange figure, who springs away and then returns. Mahony darts off after the cat they were chasing, and the old man remains silent next to the narrator. Then he breaks into a frightening monologue about whipping insolent young boys, how boys who have sweethearts and keep secrets should be whipped without mercy. He tells the narrator he would "whip such a boy as if he were unfolding some elaborate mystery."

The narrator, disturbed and afraid, leaps up and pretends to tie his shoe. Then he bids the man goodbye and climbs the slope of the field, fearful that the man will grab him by the ankles. He calls to Mahony across the field, and the other boy mercifully comes to his rescue.

The Author's Underlying Purpose. Joyce shows how anyone seeking adventure is confronted with the unsavory elements that such a world harbors. By flouting the conventions of home and school, the adventurer is faced with some terrifying truths. For the old man claims the narrator as belonging more in his world than to the one he left behind. The narrator cannot simply close his eyes to "darker things."

Problems/Strengths. Problems arise because "An Encounter" is told entirely in the first person, some, particularly in the opening pages wherein the narrator describes activities and brief situations that span a great deal of time. But these passages could easily be altered for the purposes of a short film. The narrative voice is a strong one, and it might be interesting to use some narration, [perhaps] an older man looking back on a formative encounter of his youth. This piece relates quite closely to my themes in that it once again deals with individuals taking steps over

> boundaries to confront something darker. The narrator's life can never be the same now that he knows what exists on the fringes of his safe world. He will not have the simple, blind life that Mahony is intended to lead.

Peter is right; this first-person story does pose problems. However, if we ask, "To whom might the main character be telling the story?" then we perceive he could be addressing friends in the school dormitory, or even the boy who didn't show up. In the telling, his narrated memories could turn into present-tense happenings, but this threatens to become clumsy and artificial unless the listener plays an active part. In this regard even a great work like *Wuthering Heights* is flawed, because it uses a servant to narrate, one who plays no further part in the events. In a book the reader quickly forgets her, but her physical presence in a film would be more intrusive. Seeing her present for no reason, we would quickly understand that she is an author's convenience.

A strength in Peter's choice is that, by rejecting the suffocating, sheltered world of their school in favor of the unknown delights of the docklands, the main characters initiate the action. This makes them energetic and questing adventurers—until, that is, the advent of the perplexing older man, whose dominant characteristic is a masked sexual frustration.

Let's ask that key question about him: *What is he trying to get, do, or accomplish?* Answer? He might be hoping for a vicarious sexual experience by asking the boys to share their amorous experiences. However, they have patently never had any interaction with girls, and the man surely knows it. His flattering and chummy manner suggests he is probing the boy's vulnerabilities, a distinctly unsettling behavior that points toward pedophiliac "grooming" (systematic breaking down of a child's resistance to sexual intentions). Sensing something overheated in this, the boy flees. His friend Mahony is, however, untouched because his sensibilities are too coarse to be receptive. What makes the story poignant is that, being young and sheltered, the central character is in danger of feeling that all adult sexuality is tainted.

> Ask insistently "*What is this character trying to do or get?*" as you try to get inside your characters. Answering always yields new subtexts, new underlying motivations. From these you can assemble something of larger meaning. Apply this simple little question to the real-life interchanges going on around you and it reveals unending possible agendas. To really challenge your powers of observation, assess your own motivations during daily life.

Example 2, "Le Diner de Cons," by Francis Veber (Louis Leterrier)

This short story is fairly recent. Its French title can be translated as "Dumb Supper." The author is Francis Veber, a well-known French author-director. Some of his most famous work has been remade in such Hollywood films as *The Toy* or more recently *The Birdcage*.

Summary. It's Thursday night and for Peter Brochant and his friends it is Dumb Supper day. The rule of this game is rather simple: Each brings along the most stupid person they could find. The person that has discovered the most spectacularly simpleminded is declared the winner.

Tonight, Peter is ecstatic: he has found a rare pearl of dumbness. The ideal retard. "A World class dummy!" Frankie Pigeon, public servant pee-on at the Internal Revenue Service. Frankie's only passions are the models he makes with matches.

But what Peter doesn't know is that Frankie more than anything else is one of the most unlucky people, and one of the masters in creating catastrophes. . . .

But tonight Peter doesn't feel that great because he's thrown out his back. He tries to call the meeting off. But he has no way of contacting Frankie on time, so Frankie will arrive at Peter's luxurious apartment and, alarmed by Peter's situation, will decide to stay with Peter and refuse all of his host's invitations to leave. This is the beginning of a long nightmare for Peter Brochant, in which his entire universe crumbles around him.

The Author's Underlying Purpose. The author's underlying purpose is to show first that the richest and most intelligent people are most of the time not the happiest people alive. They have so many skeletons in their closet that it is sometimes hard to contain them all. Also the superiority complex they constantly carry is sometimes unbearable, especially when they realize that the people whom they consider inferior are most of the time better off being that way in this world. His purpose is therefore rather simple. It is a gentle criticism of today's society where, even if we believe that class divisions have vanished, they are still very much present.

Problems/Strengths. Strange coincidences are pivotal in this story. Its compression—the entire action taking place in one evening and in one location (Peter Brochant's apartment)—is both the strength and weakness of this piece. Sometimes this becomes repetitive, and the other characters who interact in the rest of the piece with our two protagonists feel a little hemmed in. Another strength is because it is rather original, especially in America, to see this kind of story applied in that kind of setting. If we were to adapt this story for the screen, its cost would be ridiculously cheap. Isn't that all we are looking for when writing a short film?

At the end of the story Peter eventually realizes his mistake in misjudging his guest. He will find a new friend in Frankie and reevaluate all of his life in the process. This moral falls inside two of my themes: We find our most sincere friends in the strangest of places and situations, and the idea that several steps must be passed in order to develop one's own identity. There is a little bit of Peter Brochant in every one of us. No one is open-minded enough.

This story too may prove difficult to adapt for the screen. Here the development you anticipate for the main character is interior and only shows externally as an incremental relaxation of Peter's judgmental qualities. Louis is understandably taken with the story's moral purpose—that our first valuations are usually based on rank prejudice—but he doesn't say how the all-important steps in Peter's inner transformation are to become outwardly visible. Any film about a change of heart succeeds only if it can show a series of clear behavioral steps. Then its actors can portray each turning point.

Every screen narrative—whether comedy, tragedy, or anything else—depends on being realized as a series of behaviors, each leading to the next like the building blocks in a flow chart. In behavior, actions speak louder than words. The art of adaptation lies in turning a literary work into a flow of visually communicative sequences, each yielding action and visual or aural evidence for the audience to assess.

The next stages of development in Louis's adaptation would be to

Actions speak louder than words. What people do is a far better guide to their intentions than anything they might say.

Anticipation. Effective drama presents a series of behavioral building blocks, each posing puzzles that fill us with anticipation, and each scene outcome making us anticipate what might happen next. This makes us an active audience, not one waiting passively to be informed.

block out those steps in his main character's development, and then to find the behavioral clues that hint at the changes Peter is experiencing—by no means an easy task.

OVERVIEW

Both examples are told through the main characters' minds and perceptions. This is not surprising given that successful short stories capitalize on what literature does best. Paradoxically, second-rate literature may be more amenable to adaptation, especially if it is melodramatic and thus more cinematic. Jean-Luc Godard made no secret about taking some of his plots from the *Serie Noir* of French pulp fiction. Conversely, when a great novel is stripped of its interior, contemplative qualities and boiled down to its plot line, it usually emerges as a travesty of the original.

To shop well for stories in literature requires a rather strong, confident sense of how you mean to use the screen. Until experience teaches this clarity, you are vulnerable to the seduction of words (hardly the worst of fates!). And here—can you tell?—I speak ruefully, having learned the hard way through failure. Possibly an inspiring story will so enthuse you so that you turn words brilliantly into film narrative. Most learning in the arts, as in life, comes from failed experiment.

Of course, these two stories might still become first-rate films, since the writers have only made a preliminary assessment. This stage is the first skirmish; the serious encounter waits down the road. Never be deterred from any story that you really, really like. Not, anyway, until you have done considerable work at trying to solve its particular problems. This brings its own fascination and enlightenment. If you are impatient to expand any outline into a full script or other finished form, skip to Chapter 22: Expanding Your Outline.

GOING FARTHER

More often than not, a short story contains the kernel of a whole feature film, and the screen version may even surpass the original. Nicholas Roeg's mystery *Don't Look Now* (1971), taken from a short story by Daphne du Maurier, is a superb, tight, highly cinematic development of du Maurier's fascination with the dimensions beyond death. Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) was adapted from Cornell Woolrich's "It Had to Be Murder" and, like all his films, takes on a life of its own. *Across the Bridge* (1957), which I worked on as a youth, was adapted from a Graham Greene story, and starred Rod Steiger. He was at the peak of his form and playing an Enron-type executive on the run from Interpol.

Here are some books about the adaptation process and an excellent guide to legal issues in filmmaking. The Skaggs volumes are invaluable studies of films made from classic short-story origins. In case I sound too negative about subjective short stories, John Korty's masterly film *The Music School* (1976) is generated from a five-and-a-half-page story by John Updike and set entirely in a man's mind. You can get Korty's film as a VHS tape from Facets Multimedia (www.facets.org) which, by the way, is the largest and most knowledgeable videotheque in North America.

Bluestone, George. *Novels into Film*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003. (An old book now back in print that does an excellent job of assessing adaptations of such classics as *Wuthering Heights, Pride and Prejudice, The Grapes of Wrath*, and *Madame Bovary*.)

Donaldson, Michael. *Clearance & Copyright: Everything the Independent Filmmaker Needs to Know*, 2nd ed. Silman-James, 2003. (Superb on copyright, acquiring rights, public domain, setting up writing partnerships, and much else besides.)

Richardson, Robert. *Literature and Film*. Taylor & Francis, 1985. (Now out of print, this remains a lucid and intelligent comparison of fundamentals in the languages of literature and film.)

Seger, Linda. *The Art of Adaptation: Turning Fact and Fiction into Film*. Henry Holt, 1992. (Down-to-earth exploration of literature, theater, and real-life stories as origins for films, with a chapter on that fine two-headed beast, docudrama.)

Skaggs, Calvin. *The American Short Story*, 2 vols. Both Laurel Press, volume 1, 1977; volume 2, 1980. (These are the best comparative study resources that I know of. You get: a great collection of classic short stories by Cather, Crane, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Hawthorne, Hemingway, James, O'Connor, Thurber, Updike, and Wright; critical essays; and scripts for the 1970s films made from them in the *American Short Story* Public Broadcasting Service series. Many of these films are available on VHS or DVD through Facets Multimedia [www.facets.org]. The films and DVDs are probably in NTSC video standard only if you are reading this in a PAL country.)

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16

Ten-Minute, News-Inspired Story

The assignments at the end of this chapter give experience at making use of a news story or photojournalism as a starting point for expressing a theme. In the process, we will cast aside the rules of good journalism and make a deliberately self-centered use of actuality. They are also an exercise in scaling ideas down to a ten-minute duration.

Every story has its initial *scale*, but in the real world of films and television you are usually allowed a very limited time with the audience. Try to see this not as deprivation but as a challenge to be concise, evocative, and moving. How can you say a lot in a little? To solve this, make use of what you know about the dramatic arc, starting with the apex:

- What can you put at its apex? (This is the dramatic focus of your piece.)
- How little of the rising action (setup) do you need to get us there?
- How much or little of the falling action after the apex must you show if you are to plant the idea of change and resolution?

Figure 16–1 by the famous war photographer Robert Capa (1913–1954) is a renowned photograph from the Spanish Civil War that shows just how much can be implied in a single moment. We see a meagerly equipped peasant soldier with his brains flying from his cranium at the instant of his death. Before this moment he began charging down a stubbly slope toward the enemy. After this moment he will collapse and become another corpse on a rural battlefield. This hundredth-of-a-second moment forcefully captures a single, tragic truth about warfare: *In one irreversible moment, someone beloved by family and friends forfeits his life to a belief.*[1] Difficult and even terrible issues about the human thirst for conflict flow from this.

1. An unresolved thirty-year debate continues as to whether Capa staged this photograph. Even if he did (which I don't believe), the significance of what it represents is undiminished.

Figure 16–1 Famous photograph, taken during the 1936–1939 Spanish Civil War, of a soldier at the moment of his death. (Photography by Robert Capa ©2001 by Cornell Capa/Magnum Photos.)

Now imagine that a wealthy eccentric lays an arm over your shoulder and offers you a substantial budget and a ten-minute exposure on national television. What, he asks, are your ideas for a short, factually derived movie? Your first thought is that the time offered is awfully short for anything serious. But ten minutes to communicate with your audience is sixty thousand times longer than Capa needed.

> *Propaganda and drama are different.* Propaganda employs any means necessary to persuade us to accept an agenda of foregone conclusions. Drama draws us into the dilemmas of people contending with complex and often contradictory forces. It shows options and invites us to draw our own conclusions.

Your patron goes on to tell you that the conventional restraints of objectivity and political balance are irrelevant; all you need do is develop an interesting film idea for a mass audience from a real event, and make it express your deeper concerns and values.

You will need to find some real event from your photo or clippings collections, something involving the ambiguity of real life that can serve as a vehicle to air your concerns and values. This need not lead you toward propaganda, since the full compass of dramatic truth keeps turning up in

everyday life. The challenge is to make something appealing to a general television audience but that is socially aware and critical.

Any adaptation of fact, however carefully written to seem objective, is a construct that reflects the assumptions and beliefs of the adaptor. As in fictional assignments, intellectual or emotional convictions invariably emerge. Indeed, it's not worth doing all that work if it doesn't hold meaning for you. So here's a reliable method, whenever you set out to create a story, to ensure that topic and belief are in step.

MAKING A WORKING HYPOTHESIS

No matter whether you are developing fiction or nonfiction ideas, it is useful to turn your beliefs and intentions into a key statement called a *working hypothesis* (see sidebar definition). To take advantage of this supremely useful tool, simply complete the following sentences:

> A *working hypothesis* is a planning statement for a narrative—fictional or factual. Starting from a particular conviction you hold, it describes particular events befalling particular characters in a particular world, and defines the feelings and realizations you mean to awaken in your audience. Making one for an intended work forces you to be clear with your intentions. Remaking it after any big round of changes during the project is an excellent reality check.

a. In life I believe that . . . (your belief in relation to this topic)
b. I will show this in action through (topic) . . .
c. The main conflict is between . . . and . . . (main opposing forces)
d. The point of view character(s) will be . . .
e. I want my audience to realize that . . .
f. And to feel that . . .

When one is going to shoot actuality, there is no assured form or outcome, so anything that can help focus one on storytelling is helpful. As my longtime colleague Chap Freeman pointed out, the working hypothesis helps you to design a bridge between your personal belief and the hearts and minds of your audience. You are therefore defining a *dramatic delivery system*. Of course, you amend it as research, new experience, and better ideas follow on. Strangely enough, many working professionals never articulate this, and when questioned are at a loss to describe their goals. Screenwriters are particularly liable to flying blind in this way.

Whichever assignment you choose, do as much as you can of the following:

Supply a copy or summary of the news item's content, or a copy of the photograph you used as the starting point.

Say how your television idea might be covered and presented, avoiding the more tedious paraphernalia of presenters, reporters, experts, and talking-head interviews. Aim to eliminate the conventional intermediaries (hosts, introducers, interviewers, reporters) and put the audience in direct contact with the characters and their predicament. What you might want to specify instead is:

- Archive footage, if it could reasonably exist.
- Any action you can imagine filming, even though the event has already happened.
- Recorded sound interviews that can be used as "interior monologues" for a main character or characters. These are created through a sound-only interview, with the interviewer's questions eliminated.

Write notes on,

- Why you chose this story or image and illustrate this with a working hypothesis for the work you are planning.
- What you want the audience to feel, and to realize.
- The strengths and weaknesses of your initial proposal.

ASSIGNMENTS

Assignment 16-1: A Picture and Its Consequences

Explore the consequences of an image through the perceptions and predicament of someone peripheral. It can be someone in the picture, or someone that you infer may be connected to the picture's central character or issue. You might, for instance, imagine someone exploring whether Capa's soldier (see photo) is a relative who disappeared during the civil war, or the man's grown-up child pondering what the family lost at that moment.

Assignment 16-2: Reality TV Show

Take a press clipping, image, or news event from television and use it as the basis for proposing a TV reality show. These are really games that involve people committing to some radical change or test and allowing their actions and reactions to be filmed as they struggle with the new. You should be able to improve on these examples from current American television:

- *Extreme Makeover* (http://abc.go.com/primetime/extrememakeover/) in which people who feel unlovely place themselves in the hands of hairdressers, make-up artists, and even plastic surgeons. The audience gets to see "before" and "after."

- *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* (http://abc.go.com/primetime/xtremehome/) will do the same for a house that is flood damaged or home to someone with an overweening allergy. A team of maniacal builders rebuilds it in five days.
- *The Will* (http://www.cbs.com/primetime/the_will/) in which ten heirs compete to demonstrate to the (still living) patriarch which of them most deserves to inherit his five-hundred-acre ranch.
- *The Simple Life* (www.fox.com/simplelife/) lodges two young actresses ("celebutantes," the program website calls them) with a family while they try out a new profession as an unpaid intern. Jobs chosen for them included working in an airport, a day care center, and (least favorite) a morgue.
- *Road to Stardom with Missy Elliott* (http://www.upn.com/shows/missy_elliott//) is a traveling song contest whose semifinals each take place in a different city. Along the way the contestants meet Missy's celebrity friends and learn "what it takes to be an artist."
- *Queer Eye for the Straight Girl* (www.bravotv.com/Queer_Eye_for_the_Straight_Girl/) takes a young woman through a "life-affirming event" such as her thirtieth birthday party, and watches as the Gal Pals or "make-better mavens" prepare her, inside and out, to make it through the great ordeal.

Assignment 16-3: Docudrama

Here you take real events as the basis for a dramatization. Use actual people recreating conversations and carrying out former actions if possible, and plan hypothetical scenes to explore missing links. Use archival or location footage, and plan to shoot in authentic surroundings whenever possible. Try this website from the Museum for Broadcast Communication for extensive notes and examples: http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/D/htmlD/docudrama/docudrama.htm.

Assignment 16-4: Based on a Real Story . . .

Sometimes so little can be shown as reality footage that you take the bones of a situation and then fictionalize it in order to explore issues that can be shown no other way. An example would be from January 2005 when Sergeant Kevin Benderman, an American career soldier, decided to become a conscientious objector no matter what the consequences. In Iraq he had seen dogs feeding off corpses in a mass grave and had been made to drive past a ten-year-old Iraqi girl clutching an arm blackened from third-degree burns and begging for help. His officer and his army chaplain had written

him off as a coward, but to him the issue had become, "Do I really want to stay in an organization where the sole purpose is to kill?" His wife had seen his doubts develop and may be his only supporter. For the whole story see: www.cnn.com/2005/US/01/13/objecting.soldier.ap/.

This is a story that has largely happened, bar the court-martial (if the army is foolish enough to insist on one), but a story like this raises major issues. If it is illegal to torture prisoners of war, should it not be illegal to inflict mayhem on another culture for no clear defensive reason? Shouldn't a soldier be guided by a conscience in both cases?

Assignment 16-5: Behind the Façade

This assignment explores irony—that is, the mismatch between what something purports to be and what it really is. The reality show mentioned previously, *The Road to Stardom with Missy Elliott*, exploits the difference between the allure of being a "star" and all the hard grind it takes behind the scenes to get there. You should look for weightier examples, such as an upscale restaurant where, out of sight, the immigrant kitchen help works in hellish temperatures and is ready to disembowel each other, or a glamour show in which the high-kicking lovelies prove to be male cross-dressers.

Assignment 16-6: This Far, and no Farther

A film about someone getting to the end of his or her tether, and deciding to make a profound change. Sgt. Benderman in Assignment 16-4 is a prime candidate for a project like this. Where people draw that line in the sand would make a good TV series. The challenge, of course, is to get beyond the talking-head treatment.

Assignment 16-7: Analyze Four News Items

Choose four news items and for each write about a novel point of view, major conflict, and a theme, then draw some conclusions about the comparisons you can make.

Assignment 16-8: Develop Interpersonal Difference

Take an intriguing or ambiguous news item involving at least two people and make it the basis for a fiction piece. Develop the arc of change for

each person. Here is an example from my local paper,[2] transposed into the present tense: A nineteen-year-old man is arguing with his ex-girlfriend in an alley when a man in his twenties approaches. The newcomer starts arguing with him, then stabs him in the stomach and flees. The victim, taken to a local hospital and pronounced in serious but stable condition, is asked by the police about the attack. He answers, "I just want to let it go."

What's the story here? Can it be made morally interesting?

Note: Because the news examples by my NYU students have become dated, I have generated new assignments, inventing examples myself for some of them.

DISCUSSION

- How well did the ideas you saw or heard fit into the ten-minute requirement?
- Did they cover the necessary expository detail?
- Did they raise worthwhile social issues?
- Did they leave a satisfying sense of closure by the end?
- What belief system did you think emerged from the adaptation?
- How cinematic was the adaptation?

GOING FARTHER

Here are sources for anyone who is interested in deriving story ideas from actuality, or exploring the hinterland between documentary and fiction.

Bernard, Sheila Curran. *Documentary Storytelling for Film and Videomakers*. Butterworth-Heinemann, 2003. (A how-to that includes the author's experiences and interviews with documentary makers.)

Hemley, Robin. *Turning Life into Fiction*. Story Press, 1994. (Transforming real life into stories, gaining psychic distance between memoir and fiction, and the ethical and self-protective considerations that arise when you take liberties with fact.)

Lipkin, Steven N. *Real Emotional Logic: Film and Television Docudrama as Persuasive Practice*. Southern Illinois University Press, 2002. Examines nature of docudrama derived from "true stories" and the effect of melodramatic narrative structures. Traces the development of docudramas in contemporary movies of the week and feature films.

Rabiger, Michael. *Directing the Documentary*, 4th ed. Focal Press, 2004. (For a brief overview of the way documentary has been used over its decades of existence, see Chapter 2, "A Brief and Functional History of the Documentary." Chapters 3

2. *Pioneer Press News-Star*, January 12, 2005, Section 1, page 2, "24th District."

and 4 deal with finding and developing documentary ideas, and Chapters 8 and 9 deal with research and with developing a proposal, including the working hypothesis.)

Rosenthal, Alan. *Why Docudrama? Fact-Fiction on Film and TV*. Southern Illinois University Press, 1999. (An excellent anthology of essays laying out the history, principles, and uses of this sometimes treacherously hybrid form.)

Rosenthal, Alan. *Writing, Directing, and Producing Documentary Films and Videos*. Southern Illinois University Press, 2002.

Seger, Linda. *The Art of Adaptation: Turning Fact and Fiction into Film*. Henry Holt, 1992. (Down-to-earth exploration of literature, theater, and real-life stories as origins for films, and a chapter on docudrama.)

17

A Documentary Subject

Making documentary is fascinating because it so often confirms how richly and dramatically ordinary people lead their lives. Knowing this, novelists and screenwriters will carry out painstaking research into situations and types of people they intend putting in their fiction. Really, documentary and fiction are not so unlike in the end—they are just different strategies for investigating the human condition.

> When writers conduct *research*, they study what those they want to write about are really like and how they handle real situations. This authenticity leads to depth and authority in their fiction and can even make it a superior guide to a particular world.

Even if you never intend making a documentary, researching actual worlds is highly productive, for the best imagination can never equal the profundity and unexpectedness of the real. But this does not mean that stories from real life exist ready made. If you want to portray a yoga ascetic, a mine-clearing squad, or a young African shepherd at work, the challenge will always be the same: to figure out what story to tell, and what point of view to take. Like an artist deciding what sculpture lies within the block of stone, the documentary maker must decide what to liberate from the surfeit of detail that fogs every subject.

Modern documentary seldom arranges life for the camera; instead, it tries to capture events as they happen. Since life is sometimes unpredictable, the documentarian gambles on capturing what can reasonably be anticipated and what comes as gifts (or blows) from the gods. Writing for a yet-to-be-shot documentary is maddeningly speculative. How, people ask, can you possibly write about something that has not yet happened? Why even bother? Why not just wait and shoot what happens? This passive approach

will produce a record, but seldom a documentary, because it requires the interpretive intelligence of an overall vision.

If your film is to take a coherent position on what is to unfold, you must write in advance in order to coalesce what you know, and be ready for the unexpected. This is especially true when you are a beginner. Reacting, after all, is not directing. To write ahead of directing is to think, and to think is to prepare. Forethought is the key to intelligent directing. And you can prepare. If, for instance, you are going to film a group of history buffs reenacting an 1860s battle, you can discover the overall shape of events in advance simply because there is a plan, and your warriors want to keep to it.

A documentary proposal must do two things: It must promise what reasonably can be expected and predict as much of the haphazard as it can. You cannot, for instance, foresee that in your war-games film an artilleryman will be run over by a cannon wheel, or that the 1860s battlefield will be invaded by a modern ambulance crew. So you must be prepared for what life serves up, and acknowledge in a proposal what the unexpected might be. That's the best you can do.

Imagine, instead, that you set out to cover a volatile marital situation. You face true uncertainty but also the promise of a film with considerable dramatic tension. David Sutherland's *The Farmer's Wife* (Public Broadcasting Service documentary series, USA, 1998) shows a Nebraska couple battling to hold on to the family farm, and every new crisis in their deteriorating marriage brings multiple possible outcomes. The director must make contingency plans for each imagined outcome, and shoot accordingly.

> *Observational cinema* and *participatory cinema* are alternative philosophies of making documentary. The first uses an observational camera, tries not to intercede or disturb its subject, and hopes to catch interesting truths as they happen. The second sees intercession by, or interaction with, the filmmakers as a valid part of filmmaking. It allows the filmmakers to catalyze responses or events, which in turn reveals underlying truths.

As you may already see, making documentary appeals to those who like improvising responses to life as it unfolds. They are the jazz musicians of filmmaking, while feature filmmakers play from the symphony score of a script. But actors improvising is significant to the work of fiction directors like Ingmar Bergman, John Casavettes, Jean-Luc Godard, and Mike Leigh, and is a key to much comedy, most recently that of Larry David.

For this chapter's assignments, aim to involve us emotionally in something that matters to you and provoke us into thinking critically. Because interview-based films are too much like journalistic television, most documentary makers avoid "talking heads" unless the interviewee is divulging something unusual or deeply felt. Modern documentaries like Hubert Sauper's *Darwin's Nightmare* (2005) try to tell their stories using imagery,

action, and behavior rather than narrating them through to-camera interviews. That said, every rule has its exceptions. Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line* (1988), apart from its famous reenactment scenes, is largely interviews, but the characters, their story, and the presentation that Morris uses are so original and fantastic that the film belongs in a class all its own.

At the outset your film must establish contextual or setup information, a phase called *exposition*. A film about a failing neighborhood grocery must show not only the distress of the owner but scenes with his bank manager and wholesaler so you can reveal the market forces that press so hellishly on small businesses like his. You must establish how supermarket chains have forced down their prices by removing employee benefits and shaving their profit margins.

Your job is not just to focus your audience on the central situation but to provide contextual information that will sustain interest at an intense level. This means collecting good evidence and multiple versions of it. So long as the promising materials have been shot, the content and order of the film's argument are usually not determined until editing.

> *Exposition* is the framework of facts and backstory that allows the audience to fully understand the characters, their issues, and context. Exposition is least intrusive when concealed within the story's developing action.

Human problems arise because vulnerable characters fall prey to a combination of inner and outer forces. You don't need to depict them all—catalogs are the job of the social historian or sociologist—but the audience knows instinctively when a situation is not properly justified, oversimplified, or rendered in the ideological monochrome of good versus evil. If, however, you show your grocery going bust through the perceptions of someone to whom the breakdown really *is* a matter of good and evil (a beleaguered teenage son, for instance), then you could make us feel the poignancy of his simplified view while sketching in the more complex forces that he is unable to appreciate.

> *Drama investigates the human condition*. Effective documentary and fiction go further than merely presenting facts or reflecting what anyone present could see. Drama confronts us with human enigmas and puzzles to resolve. To illustrate solutions or preach what is right and wrong is the job of moral instruction or propaganda, not drama.

Like the best fiction films, documentaries are strongest when they show characters in action. Action is in the present, while interviews usually speak in the past and reflect events already closed. A historical subject can be made no other way, but current subjects are infinitely more gripping when recorded as they unfold. To watch two beginners clumsily piloting a canoe down a fast

river is *primary evidence* and far more exciting than hearing them recall it later. If, however, an agnostic canoeist finds himself praying that he will survive, something has occurred within him that no amount of camerawork can reveal. Only through voice-over or interview will we ever know about it.

> *Dramatic tension* is the uncertainty and anticipation we feel as an audience and something that the wise dramatist keeps on the boil. By keeping us aware and involved, and by confronting us with contradictory evidence, good drama stretches our emotional, critical, and analytical faculties.

Plan to film what will make the audience see, feel, and think about the issues. Doing this well often means orchestrating the conflict between the opposing forces at work. But isn't this manipulation? Yes, it is. Manipulation is unavoidable in filmmaking since you cannot even take an objective shot, let alone make an objective film. Every camera position, every length of action recorded, every choice in editing is a subjective human decision, and thus is manipulated. Nothing objective here.

The fact is that all films, indeed all artworks, are *constructs* that mean to lead the onlooker through an experience. We turn to the screen when we want to see through other eyes and feel what it is like to be someone else. If the conflicting forces in your film do not meet, you should try to ensure that they do, and on camera. With your encouragement, the pregnant daughter thrown out of the home two decades ago by her outraged father will get up the courage to confront the mother who failed to protest and with whom she is still angry. She will ask the question that has dogged her: Why didn't you intervene and try to save me?

There is a tricky ethical aspect to helping make the reality you want for your film. You need to show (not tell) what would lead a reasonable person toward the conclusions you drew, but also you must avoid looking like a propagandist expounding a cause. So it's wise to build in the ambiguities and contradictions that you had to puzzle over and to delay resolving them onscreen as long as possible. Ideally your audience draws its own conclusions from pertinently presented evidence (see sidebar "The uses of delay.")

For the documentary work in this chapter, the goals are to:

- Find a report of a real situation or event that resonates your chosen themes.
- Turn that situation into a factually based screen story that will serve your authorial purposes and interests.

To develop a subject for your documentary film, choose a situation from your collection of news-clippings, one that:

- Could be made into a thirty- to sixty-minute documentary film.
- Has an inbuilt development of events or an evolving character so the film won't merely elaborate some static, unchanging situation.

- Engages your audience in some significant aspect of the real world. (To do this means to involve your audience in ways that might be fascinating, disturbing, aggravating, frightening, funny, engrossing—you name it.)

The uses of delay. The father of the mystery novel, Wilkie Collins, advocated delay in storytelling as a way to hold the reader's attention: "Make them laugh, make them cry, but make them wait." This is good advice for every kind of storytelling.

When you discuss ideas for documentaries, consider,

"*Character is fate*." By making choices consistent with our experience and temperament, we help to construct our destiny. When you create characters, or contemplate them in real life, ask yourself:

- What is this person trying to get or do—in the short term and long term?
- What in each instance is stopping him or her?
- How does he or she adapt to this?

- What is the topic, the "corner of life," that you will show us? What makes it potentially interesting and significant?
- Whose POV are we seeing through?
- What is the central conflict for the main character or characters?
- Does the film promise some kind of confrontation between the opposing forces faced by its character(s)?
- Do you see a possibility (or better, a probability) of development in the main character(s)?
- Do you think the film will have a distinctive style?
- Does it have something heartfelt to show or say?
- How do you think it would affect a general audience?

Many documentaries are biographical, and thus character driven. Invariably characters of magnitude have issues in their lives arising from the imperatives of their temperament. To show real people wrestling with their goals and demons is a richly satisfying way to explore the nexus between disposition and destiny. By astute casting you can, in fact, explore the foremost issues in your own life, and avoid any need to step in front of the camera yourself.

There are also:

- Event-driven documentaries that chronicle an event and its effect on given characters.
- Diary documentaries, in which the camera is used as a notebook.
- Essay documentaries, which do what a photo or literary essay might.
- Historical documentaries.

- Travelogue documentaries.
- Journey or process documentaries.
- Reflexive documentaries, which reflect on the effects of making the film or on the filmmakers' conceptual process.
- Fake documentaries ("mockumentaries") that often lampoon the clichés and deadly earnestness of the worst examples.

There's something for everybody; some of these forms can be realized in one of the two other assignments calling for simple video documentaries rather than written proposal materials.

ASSIGNMENTS

Assignment 17-1: A Documentary Subject

In your writing you should:

Give a brief outline of the background or context to the subject.
Describe your main character(s) and his/her/their major problem.
Let your film bring a magnifying glass to a situation that is significant but can be small.
Resist the novice's urge to include everything life has taught you.
Explain what your film's underlying story organization would be.
Usually this requires that you:
Consider how to handle the progression of time in the movie.
Decide whether the main character is the POV character or if there is another valid POV you can use.
Describe any special approaches you might take in shooting, directing, interviewing, or any ironic editing techniques you'd use to get your thematic argument across.

Assignment 17-2: Simple Voice-over Personal Film

For a film of five to ten minutes, take a series of photographs at a special event, or use a series that someone else took, then,

1. Have someone interview you exhaustively to establish the steps in the event, its meaning to you moment by moment. Or, in the same way, to interview someone present for whom the event was important.
2. Transcribe the interview. Take a copy, mark it, and then, using simple video-editing software, cut it up so it becomes a linear, chronological, and concise account. Pay attention to the natural rhythms of the

speaker and choose material that illuminates the speaker and the content of the photos.

3. Shoot videotape of each photo, and go very close so you can shoot shots within the photo. This way a single photo may yield up to five or six shots.
4. Using a simple video-editing program, assemble the still photos and the oral account against each other. If you shoot a talking head while making the interview voice recording, try to use sound only and make the entire visual element of your film from the still photos.

Assignment 17-3: Simple Voice-over Historical Film

Same as 17-2, but videotape a series of photos concerning a special event from a photo collection or magazine. A natural disaster like the 2004 tsunami, an oil tanker sinking, or an earthquake like those in Turkey or Iran would make suitable subjects. Find a person in the photos for whom you could write an imagined first-person account of the experience. Use research to find what they might relate about the events, their situation, and how it all felt. Your central character might, for instance, be a young boy camping in a wrecked street, or a badly bruised woman rescued from the sea and searching desperately for her family.

Be aware that you can only do this as private practice at filmmaking. You cannot use a photographer's work for any public showing without appropriate permission.

EXAMPLE (IN RESPONSE TO ASSIGNMENT 17-1)

Documentary Subject (Angela Galyean)

Timmy B——, ten years old, hated going to school. His truancy became so chronic that his parents took him to a psychiatrist who prescribed Prozac as treatment for Timmy's obstinacy. At first, Timmy's reaction to the drug was positive. It was not until the psychiatrist increased his dosage that Timmy began to experience violent mood swings. "He'd get really angry and stuff like that. He'd scream at you and then a few minutes later, he'd love you and hug you and not even remember being so angry," his mother, Cindy, said after the court hearing.

Only weeks after the start of Timmy's Prozac regimen, the fourth-grader grabbed his three-year-old niece as a human shield, aimed a twelve-gauge shotgun at a sheriff's deputy,

and exclaimed, "I'd rather shoot you than go to school." It comes as no surprise that Timmy's lawyer blames this outburst on the antidepressant drug.

Timmy's court case is the first known to involve a child using Prozac, which has not been proved [safe] for use in children for any condition. The drug's label notes that Prozac's safety and effectiveness for children has not been established. But Prozac is used to treat 56 percent of depressed children's cases because it has been proven effective for adults.

"Timmy B——was under the influence of a mind-altering drug at the time of the incident," the B——s' attorney noted. Prozac is the world's largest-selling antidepressant, with sales more than $1 billion a year. However, the drug's success has been clouded by claims that it causes violent mood swings and suicidal thoughts.

This story is particularly fascinating to me because it involves an obvious dysfunctional family situation and the mystery/fascination of today's Prozac. I have always feared the use of Prozac and have intimately experienced its effects on people I have known before, after, and during the use of the drug. This case is unusually interesting to me because it incorporates a child's life and mind. Timmy's life has been permanently damaged by a decision he did not make.

The film would first focus on Timmy, his parents, and the events of Timmy's life before he hated school, and therefore prior to seeing his psychiatrist. Then it would cover his experience in therapy, and the event itself. I would like to push ahead to examine what effects the trial is having on Timmy and what his life is like now that things have calmed down. I am only concerned with the cellular life of Timmy and the B——s, and this would make up the heart of the film.

By showing as much as I could of the lifestyle they had and have, I could translate a truly human experience made unique by Timmy. The narrative organization would depend on what response I got from the B——s, their community, and the participants of the court case. These people would be featured in the film, but my goal would be to show as little of the outside world as I could to parallel the entrapment of Timmy's mind while under the influence of the drug.

I have never made a documentary proper, so I would need to do miles of leg-work before diving into this project.

> It seems to me that this story might be able to tell itself, but I have a feeling that this is a common delusion of people making documentary films. Interviewing would need to be very intimate. Ideally, I would like to spend as much time as possible with the B——s so as to achieve ultimate comfort and ease within the interviews.
>
> My particular moral stance on the subject of antidepressant drugs is quite simple. I think they are dangerous and unnecessary. That would have to be the moral slant the film would take, because I am very adamant and passionate about this subject. Going with the grain of the story, as I understand it, would be demonstrating a positive message in the minds of the participants, leading me to [hope for] further cooperation from the family. I tend to despise negative exposure in documentary subject films and plan to avoid that style at all costs.

Angela speaks truly when she says, "This story might be able to tell itself, but I have a feeling that this is a common delusion of people making documentary films." Nevertheless, her strategy is quite practical, involving as it does dividing her account into three parts that mirror the classic three-act drama:

i. *Backstory and exposition:* that is, life before using the drug, the boy's developing school phobia that led to his need for therapy.
ii. *The struggle with a larger issue emerges*. A minor problem now turns into a much worse one as he begins taking the drug. His problem changes from school phobia to wildly fluctuating mood swings and violence. The story develops to a crescendo in the hostage-taking situation and culminates after his arrest in the rigmarole of a court case. The court decision probably represents the *climax* of the whole story.
iii. *The resolution*. This is the only present-day section. It shows the after-effects on the boy's daily life of the negative publicity and notoriety, and it questions whether the drug should be given at all, let alone to children.

Here is a main character so out of kilter that he probably denies he has any problem until Act III. So where is the conflict that will make this piece dramatic? It exists between Timmy and everyone else. Other options would be to locate it in the doctor who took the risky decision to use an undertested drug on a child, or in the parents who discovered too late that they had been naïve to trust the experts. We might switch between all three POVs, whoever would be most effective from scene to scene.

Whatever the solution, the implications are far-reaching and transcend Timmy's individual case. Consider:

- How desperate do a patient and his family have to become before a doctor resorts to risky treatment? AIDS patients, after all, had to wait in anguish while the Food and Drug Administration toiled in slow motion through its testing procedures.
- When should we trust experts, and when not? In the infamous Tuskegee experiments, poor southern black farmers were studied by the U.S. Public Health Service for forty years without ever being told that they had syphilis or being given any treatment. For sheer racist cruelty this rivals the Nazi medical experiments, and may be why African Americans have been apt to delay seeking medical help.

Angela's convictions lend authority to this film because her scars motivate her. To avoid making a film that falls into partisan simplification I would, however, recommend that she include those helped by the drug as well as those hurt by it. Depending on the user and the circumstances, every drug has side-effects and can be a blessing or a curse.

GOING FARTHER

If documentary or docudrama calls to you, here is more guidance.

Nichols, Bill. *Introduction to Documentary*. Indiana University Press, 2001. (Ethical issues, documentary as a genre, its history and work in the world, and how to write about it.)

Rabiger, Michael. *Directing the Documentary*, 4th ed. Focal Press, 2004. (Deals with the history of the form, developing proposals, shooting exercises, getting an education, and developing a career in documentary. Handles research procedures and the many conceptual/aesthetic dilemmas on the way to a final film. Extensive bibliography.)

Rosenthal, Alan. *Writing Docudrama: Dramatizing Reality for Film and TV*. Focal Press, 1994. (Devoted to the problems and advantages of the hybrid form. From concept to completion, a thorough, down-to-earth grasp of all the ins and outs of writing the docudrama. Includes a chapter on responsibilities involved when you mix truth and fiction.)

Rosenthal, Alan. *Why Docudrama? Fact-Fiction on Film and TV*. Southern Illinois University Press, 1999. (An anthology of essays about the history, practice, and problems of docudrama.)

Rosenthal, Alan. *Writing, Directing, and Producing Documentary Films and Videos*. Southern Illinois University Press, 2002. (Experienced in television journalism, Rosenthal stresses the importance of writing prior to filming.)

18

Thirty-Minute Original Fiction

A short fiction film is a potent and economical way to establish your abilities, for it demands a plot, characters, situations, style, and a substantial thematic purpose just like a long work. Three classic shorts will dispel any doubts you may have about this. Norman McClaren's classic pixillation film *Neighbours* (Canada, 1952) is about two men chatting in their adjoining yards. When a flower springs up between them, they compete almost to the death for whose side of the fence it belongs on. In *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* (France, 1962) the American Civil War is the backdrop to Robert Enrico's haunting adaptation of an Ambrose Bierce short story. Through a vision of escape, we understand how poignantly the accused man craves living at the very moment of his dying. Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (France, 1962) works almost entirely through stills. It gives us an eerie underground world of time-traveling lovers after the desolation of the Third World War.

> The *authorial point of view* is the singular attitude that authors (or film directors) take toward their own works' characters and events. A strong, clear one gives each work its individuality, urgency, and vitality.

There is a perennial shortage of excellent short films in spite of their being the fast track to writing and/or directing features professionally. Like a feature, a short film needs something concise and arresting to say about the human condition as its *authorial point of view*. It is thus a full test of your abilities, as would be writing poetry in relation to writing prose.

A short film, like a short story, usually

- Sets up a main character rapidly and economically in a particular world.
- Shows that character having something special to accomplish, get, or do.

- Pushes the main character to a point where he or she must take action.
- Focuses on how that character tackles his/her problem.
- Through the way that the central character handles key impediments, it enlarges our sense of his/her main issues, vulnerability, and capacities.
- Makes the audience and maybe the main character learn something. Thankfully, all stories are not about winners.

These points should not be treated as a formula, since short films can be plot driven, or endowed with a narrative vertebra that might depend on mood, special events, or other concerns. These points do, however, summarize how many effective storytellers use their limited time with an audience.

Why do these elements so often appear? I think it's because stories are rituals that engage us with a central character with whom we want to identify and care about. We hope things will work out for him or her, but many stories end unhappily—*and still feel satisfying*. We recognize that life is a gamble, and that unhappy outcomes are no less true than happy ones. Being true to the way things are is itself beautiful as well as sad. Behind all this lies an ancient and unchanging human need. As Michael Roemer says,

> The connection between story, or myth, and ritual has long been noted and debated. Ritual too constitutes a safe arena in which we can encounter the sacred or "real," acknowledge our helplessness and limitations, abandon our weapons and defenses, surrender control, forgive others, and be ourselves forgiven. Both ritual and plot conjugate the particular to the universal. Moreover, in ritual as in comedy and tragedy it is largely our fear, weakness, and failure—the very secrets that keep us apart in daily life—that bring us together.[1]

Stories often invoke the troubling forces in our lives—the clashes of morality, the contradictions in human desires, and the battles against the forces of the universe—and stories help us live with them.

In developing short film ideas, consider,

- What do you feel about this story at a gut level?
- What genre does this story belong in?
- What moral forces is the story handling and what work is it trying to do?
- What does its central character represent in the story's world?

1. Michael Roemer, *Telling Stories: Postmodernism and the Invalidation of Traditional Narrative*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995, Chapter 7, p. 89.

- Are the stakes high enough for the central character? In development you often find they can be raised without impairing any aspect of the story's credibility.
- What is the story's crisis, and how do you feel about it?
- Does anyone develop, and if they do, is it credible and satisfying?
- How would you rate the originality of the story?
- How would you rate its overall impact?

ASSIGNMENTS

Assignment 18-1: Treatment for an Original Thirty-Minute Fiction Piece

Write an original fiction film treatment centering around one character. We should be led to understand his or her subjective point of view, though not necessarily to agree with or like it. Try to base the story on something you have closely observed or lived through, but avoid fictionalizing anything you are still struggling with, since this will push you into writing to solve something current, with all the attendant questions of fidelity to the real. Write,

1. A scene outline summarizing the story.
2. A definition of the story's meaning and purpose.
3. A "shopping list" of the sequences with their intended running times. Estimate running times by acting out each sequence as you time it, playing all the parts yourself, and visualizing each shot (but warn those within earshot—or risk being carted away in the rubber bus).

Assignment 18-2: An Original Thirty-Minute Fiction Piece Inspired by an Image

Follow the instructions for Assignment 18-1 but derive your initial inspiration from an image or images that you collected. The English novelist John Fowles, you will recall from Chapter 5, developed two entire novels from the stimuli of images.

Assignment 18-3: An Original Thirty-Minute Fiction Piece Inspired by CLOSAT Cards

Follow the instructions for Assignment 18-1 but derive your initial inspiration either from playing a game of CLOSAT as described in Chapter 3, or simply by choosing story ingredients from CLOSAT observations you have made.

EXAMPLES (IN RESPONSE TO ASSIGNMENT 18-1)

Example 1: Thirty-Minute Original Fiction Idea (Michael Hanttula)

Scene Outline. It is the forced-retirement day for the president of a major, but anonymous, corporation. Many people, especially a team of vice-presidents, are set to gain from the president's retirement. However, he has refused to comply and has turned his office into a bunker where he has been fending off would-be intruders, slaying anyone making an attempt to oust him from his position. One by one, lower-ranking employees have made their way up to the top floor and tried to charge his makeshift bunker. Each time, they are terribly wounded or, in some way, incapacitated. Over time, the vice-presidents have run out of secretaries, assistants, and coffee people to send. Before giving up, they remember Farrago, the mailroom boy in the basement.

They send a message down to tell him that his assistance is greatly needed and that his help will undoubtedly result in the grand promotion he has been hoping for. Farrago hurries up to the lobby of the building, where the vice-presidents and heads-of-departments have established a headquarters. Tables are overturned, facing a bank of elevators on the far wall. People are busy scurrying around, looking over reports, yelling into communication devices, plotting maps and missions.

The main vice-president quickly briefs Farrago on the situation, telling of the evil actions by the president and the severity of [the need to remove] him from office. As she does this, one of the elevator doors makes a beeping sound and begins to open. Everyone dives for cover behind the tables. A secretary slowly crawls out of the elevator on his hands and knees. Many people rush to his assistance. He is clearly dying of undefined wounds. In his last breaths he is able to give the latest position of the president and warns that it will be impossible to take over the president's stronghold. He dies and Farrago becomes discouraged. However, the head vice-president reminds him of the promotion that will be his if he can dethrone the president. He agrees to the mission, collects supplies and maps, and heads up the towering building by elevator.

Inside the elevator Farrago dreams of the power and prestige his promotion will bring him as he is hailed slayer

of the president by the rest of the staff. On the top floor, he gets out and finds a labyrinth of office cubicles before him. He searches through the maze, running into dead ends, fallen adversaries that have attempted this mission before him, and various traps that impede his journey.

Along the way he runs into a guard who has decided to protect the president. They get into a scuffle and the guard is close to winning. But Farrago manages to escape the guard's grasp and, fleeing back into the labyrinth, stops short of one of the traps and takes refuge down another corridor. The guard, in fast pursuit, barrels around the corner, flings himself into the trap. As Farrago closes in to finish off the guard, he discovers that the guard is himself. He stops, the guard begs him to help the president—praising the president's goodness and condemning the evil staff that has been trying to usurp him. [The guard dies.] Farrago, now quite confused, travels further into the labyrinth after the guard's death, still in search of the president. Eventually, he happens upon his office and finds the president looking out of the window. He is aware of Farrago's presence, but not taking action.

The president states what Farrago is here for and simply asks that certain affairs [be] taken care of by the corporation after he is gone. The president tells of his initial hopes for the company and how he had wanted to do so much good. But when he tried, his staff revolted and have [since] been trying to get him out. These are surprisingly humane desires for someone declared a "villain of the people" by his staff. Farrago looks about the office, seeing awards and letters of gratitude from charities and other signs of his "good deeds." The words of the head vice-president and of the loyal guard echo through his head. The president knows about the offers of promotion that his staff will have made to Farrago and agrees that this is the best way for him to advance. However, Farrago's dream of the life of luxury that promotion offers is darkened by visions of the type of person he would become (like the staff is now) if he had such power. He moves towards the president, drawing the weapon that the staff gave him.

Back in the staff's headquarters, many are waiting anxiously, while others are still in a great deal of commotion (making deals with other companies, assuring [them] that the president is being replaced). The elevator begins its descent from the top floor and the tension in the control room becomes greater with each floor the elevator descends.

Eventually, it reaches the ground floor and the elevator bell rings, the doors burst open, and Farrago and the president come charging out together.

Meaning/Purpose of the Story. This story is about the corruption of power and the struggle to do good. Farrago first wants his promotion and will do what is necessary to get it, without thinking of the actions he'll have to take. He is, at first, manipulated by the staff with promises of promotion and power. Then, as he searches for the president, he is confronted by the guard who stops him and makes him think about what he is doing. By the time he gets to the president, he sees that the president is a person much like anyone else and that he is not the monster that the staff has described. Farrago's eagerness to aid the vice-presidents' struggle against the "dictator" president is vanquished and he sees that the president is the one with the more appealing morals. However, he realizes that if he helps the president, his opportunities for promotion would be lost. His greatest decision is between the struggle for advancing his career and his struggle for being a good person. In the end, he chooses to side with the president in an uncertain battle against the forces of the staff.

Shopping List of Sequences

1. Photomontage under titles of actions occurring in the headquarters. Use of voice-over and sound design to give the backstory (previous attempts to usurp the president, staff's decision to call upon the mailroom attendant)—45 seconds.
2. Farrago in mailroom (basement) amidst piles and piles of unsorted mail, working diligently, message drops from above with request to come above and see vice-presidents about a promotion—45 seconds.
3. Farrago entering the lobby/headquarters, being briefed, witnessing failed attempt emerging from elevator, agreeing to go, being sent up the elevator—4 minutes.
4. Farrago in elevator, dreaming of his prosperous future. He is shaken out of dream when elevator arrives on the top floor—30 seconds.
5. He sees the labyrinth before him and begins to proceed through it. He runs into dead ends, dead secretaries, and pitfalls—2 minutes.

6. He runs into guard, battles, flees, hides, guard is injured, they talk, Farrago continues on—3 minutes.
7. He finds the president, enters his office, and listens to his story. He dreams [about the choice] between the "good life" and leading a "good" life. He makes his decision—4 minutes.
8. Farrago and the president return to the lobby, surprising the staff, they attack—1 minute.

Approximate time: 16 minutes.

This is delightful Monty Pythonesque comedy, but to work well even comedy follows dramatic norms. Each genre—no matter whether it be farce, comedy *noir*, screwball comedy, historical fiction, buddy movie, or psychological thriller—comes with a set of audience expectations that the artist may both use and constructively subvert (see sidebar).

> Every *genre* has its conventions, which are both convenient and confining. These establish a rapport with the audience but always threaten to make the piece predictable. Anything of excellence will often subvert, and therefore challenge, what is standard. This in itself can create some of the tension that all stories must exact.

Though some sequences run longer than Michael estimates, the whole will still fall short of the intended thirty minutes. So from the point of screen time alone the piece unquestionably needs developing. The situation outlined at the beginning (underlings being sent, one by one, to capture the president) seems too important, and too potentially comedic, to be consigned to the backstory, which by definition we do not see. Maybe we should enter the story at an earlier stage, when our hero is still an obscure minion in his basement mailroom.

From this point onward, it feels as though some story elements are missing. When you get this feeling, you can often uncover hidden potential by comparing it with its closest parallel in myth, legend, or history. Examine Michael's story, and you see that the corporation is a kingdom, the president its king, and the labyrinthine building is his castle. The king is under siege and about to be deposed by his barons. Familiar from national or institutional history, or even from newspaper business pages, is the situation where a leader—eclipsed through age, sickness, fatal mistakes, or corruption—gets elbowed from power. Ambitious underlings position themselves for a place in the new hierarchy, and the body politic becomes unstable. It happens here because the leader is so enamored of power that he won't step down. Closeted high in the building, he is sequestered and poorly known to his inferiors. Now they only want his power for themselves.

Farrago is the lowly page or kitchen boy of folktales. Pressed into service because everyone else has failed, he looks simpleminded. But this, as we shall learn, suits his purposes. He longs for advancement in one gargantuan leap, not by inching up some corporate ladder. His motives are specious; either he is naïve, or he is opportunistic like the VPs in the lobby, who have cannily expended their underlings in battle. Farrago's moral ambiguity helps raise the tale's tension and could be played up further. Starting out as an amoral Everyman, Farrago doesn't deserve to triumph, so the longer the story keeps the odds stacked against him, the longer the delayed outcome will generate doubt and dramatic tension.

Once Farrago glimpses his reward, he launches into the labyrinth with its traps and fallen fighters. Finding his way through, he confronts what no decent labyrinth can afford to lack—a Minotaur, in the shape of the guard. After facing tests of luck, ingenuity, and persistence, Farrago must now outwit the gatekeeper of the inner sanctum. On passing this test too, he wins information (that the president is really a good person), which he accepts at face value. That he does so is problematical, for it stymies further dramatic tension. He should really doubt his informant as it might still be trick information that will lead him into a trap. The other big problem is that the guard "is himself." If this reflexive identity were built into the fabric of the whole piece, it could be interesting, but this single occurrence isn't followed up or used later (by Farrago finding that the president is also himself, for example). A single example of such a device is inconsistent and misleading, so I recommend dropping it. Instead, maybe the scene should be played so the dying guard appears to set Farrago up for the final trap.

The guard is a *shapeshifter*, for he appears as a hostile opponent yet turns out to be a helper. Conversely he could offer help but really be laying a trap—which would also make him a "trickster" archetype. To maintain tension, we'd make Farrago assume he is the latter, and then hint that the inner sanctum is a lethal trap. To heighten the tension, he should navigate several dangerous-looking situations along the way, as in the sequence when Dorothy and her friends arrive at the Wizard of Oz's spooky castle. Finding the president undefended could again be a situation of suspense as we wait for the bolt from the blue. When the president claims to be a good person, Farrago should initially disbelieve him. To keep us guessing, Farrago should interrogate the president, perhaps to establish how the standoff happened or question why the president wouldn't resign. Like Faust, Farrago might appear to bargain with the devil as he persuades himself that the president is a misunderstood man. Believing this, is he now in worse danger? For Michael's ending—Farrago emerging from the elevator in cahoots with the embattled president—to remain viable, Farrago's options must remain ambiguous right up to the point where the elevator door opens and they reveal themselves as gun-slinging partners. But this seems like a trick ending. What in fact will the partners now do? If outgunned, will they die in a *Bonnie and Clyde* shoot-out? The president might, in a plot-point

moment, reveal a truly evil nature by grabbing the gullible Farrago to use as a human shield as he makes off into the setting sun.

But say that their partnership is genuine and their motives good: Somehow they must outwit the VPs and reinstall a benevolent leadership. True, a happy ending is expected of broad comedy, but the unresolved nature of this one leaves a nagging question: How can a good man overstay his allotted time and remain admirable? Does he atone or repent, to show he has learned something? He cannot act as though nothing had happened.

If the employees are to accept the reinstatement of the old order, they will need to exhibit more moral ambiguity throughout. This is difficult since all the obedient, lower-level employees have been killed off, leaving only the middle-management greedies. Kill off all your good guys in battle, and you strain credibility when you make the bad guys go through a conversion. Life is seldom like that, and comedy never.

Another ending would be for Farrago and the president to contrive an escape and run off into the sunset together to start a new company somewhere else. Though this is true to comedy's happy endings (and regrettably true to villainy in corporate life), it violates a central assumption of the piece—that the corporation is an enclosed world where struggle is unto death.

In summary, Farrago's briefing for his heroic journey and his journey from the basement up to the heights and back down to the lobby are viable as they stand. His journey through the labyrinth needs building up, and the dying guard needs to be more ambiguous. The ordeal in the president's office could use more steps, tension, and uncertainty—particularly as the president later exudes nothing but quiet goodness. And the denouement in the lobby needs reworking.

My suggestions are only a few of the development possibilities, and it's important to recognize that they are only my solution. Others might go about suggesting development in different ways. Any critic would, however, try to raise the stakes for Farrago, giving him more to contest, more obstacles to get past, and more hard choices to make.

This already represents a lot of development and might easily expand the story far beyond the allotted thirty minutes.

Example 2: "Eggs Benedict" (Michelle Arnove)

Summary. "Eggs Benedict" is a bittersweet comedy about a struggling student, Meg Benedict. Under severe financial difficulties she goes to a fertility center and donates one of her eggs to the bank in exchange for funds.

A young couple, Kevin and Mary Donovan, who are having difficulty becoming pregnant, visit the fertility center and opt to go the route of artificial insemination, hence Meg's egg. Two years later all is well until Mary is tragically

killed in a terrible auto accident. Kevin is devastated, but is showered with love and affection by his family and friends who try to help him overcome his deep sorrow. Approximately three years later, Kevin becomes obsessed with thoughts of the semi-biological mother of his child and sets out to locate her. Through a series of channels, he is led to Meg and finds her single, attractive and not interested in anything other than her hard-hitting career in journalism. His intentions are not initially romantic, but after he meets up with Meg, he is overcome with attraction and lust. Confused and afraid, he manages to befriend her, but under false pretenses. It is not until after a few encounters that Kevin discloses his real reasons for pursuing Meg—leaving her at first angry and confused, then finally enchanted by Kevin and the baby. The rest is history. . . .

Meaning/Purpose of the Story. The story's underlying meaning and purpose suggest, again, destiny and the idea that life and death are cyclical. Although Mary's death is tragic, the birth of the baby and the eventual meeting of Kevin and Meg are inevitable. While their meeting is not accidental, the events that lead up to it suggest a sort of fate, and this lends an enlightening feeling that "accidents" and the unexpected don't always mean a truly negative outcome.

Shopping List of Sequences

1. INT. MEG'S APARTMENT: Meg is preoccupied with worries. She locates articles from magazines describing fertility clinics and egg donation—7 minutes.
2. EXT. FERTILITY CLINIC: Meg hesitates entering the clinic—2 minutes.
3. INT. CLINIC: As Meg is leaving, she passes Kevin and Mary in lobby, however neither party sees the other—2 minutes.

"TWO YEARS LATER"

4. MARY LEAVES HOUSE—1 minute.
5. MARY'S CAR ACCIDENT—1 minute.
6. INT. KEVIN AND MARY'S HOME: Kevin is in mourning—2 minutes.
7. INT. MEG'S OFFICE: Meg gets phone call regarding a tip on a great story—2 minutes.
8. EXT. OUTDOOR CAFE: Meg meets Kevin—3 minutes.

9. EXT. MONTAGES: Kevin and Meg walk the city, have dinner, take a drive together—6 minutes.
10. INT. KEVIN'S HOME: Kevin writes a letter to Meg—2 minutes.
11. EXT. MEG'S FRONT DOOR: Kevin arrives and Meg greets him with affection—2 minutes.

Approximate total: 30 minutes.

Here's another comedy. The materials are quite sketchy, especially the sequence list, where Michelle leaves out the all-important baby material. But the writing is promising, and comes, I think, from the heartfelt comments she makes on the story's underlying philosophy for which comedy is an excellent vehicle. Life, she says, is cyclical and Fate exacts a rough justice: What is taken away in one place will be given back in another—and vice versa.

By calling it a bittersweet comedy Michelle does so advisedly, for she kills off one of her main characters rather early. I have some problems with this. It is suspiciously coincidental and looks like the author cranking up pressure on her central character. There is also a genre problem, for a death in a romantic comedy is risky, though not unheard of. George in a *Seinfeld* episode manages to inadvertently *kill* his fiancée, and the audience found it hilarious. Their willingness to laugh probably depends, however, on loyalties and expectations built up during a whole series.

Could the story arrive at the same consequences by less extreme means? Make Mary flighty from the beginning, and she might return to an earlier love, leaving Kevin holding the baby meant to save their marriage. By making her exit a character issue rather than one of mortality, Michelle could avoid an awkward transition. Now Kevin can compensate for Mary's abdication by seeking a replacement mother, a stage he must pass through creditably if we are to continue liking him. But if Mary were to die, then we'd expect him to go through all the Kübler-Ross stages of loss. This is far from funny stuff, and would hold up the story's central purpose—which is to get a father searching for his child's biological mother. So, I think we can confidently suggest that Mary abscond rather than expire.

The rest of the movie has no insuperable difficulties, since it's really a variation on the chase, with the quarry having the upper hand and the hunter having to use charm, ingenuity, and the secret weapon of their baby as bait.

Central to the story is putting under test Meg's concept of herself as an independent-minded feminist by confronting her with the primal lure of motherhood. Before she fully knows what has hit her, she must decide between head and heart, between career and motherhood. The catch? That she cannot have her child unless she accepts its father and her role in a family.

Now we know where the story wants to go, we can divide it up and speculate about what else it needs:

Act I: The first phase builds pressures on the main characters and reveals their characters through showing how they act under duress. Meg needs to survive economically in order to achieve her promising career. We know it matters because she has done something extreme—selling a part of her body and lineage. Kevin and Mary need a child, but if Mary leaves, Kevin is left as a single dad. The primal need for a mate drives him to seek the child's biological mother.

Act II: Now Kevin's problem is clear, the film can turn the tables of gender by making him the compulsive nest builder. Kevin must attempt to corral Meg, and Meg must resist mightily. That's the satisfaction of this piece. Though its outcome is almost inevitable, the author must keep us and Kevin guessing as long as possible. How? Maybe Meg is a promising journalist following the best story of her career. Maybe Kevin first hides their baby in the mistaken idea that it will alienate her, when in fact it's his best argument. Maybe Meg, in writing up her story, declares feminist principles or ideas that make Kevin's plans seem hopeless.

The story must maintain the duel between their conflicting needs; ideally it should escalate all the way to the movie's major crisis point—where Meg realizes that Kevin's delightful baby is actually hers too.

To raise the stakes, maybe the story Meg is pursuing is about surrogate parenthood, and by an irony her journalism uncovers that the baby of the man so relentlessly following her is actually her own. This offers deliciously serpentine plot possibilities, and a turning point at which the baby's charm seduces Meg and compels her to make an about-turn.

Act III: If Mary were absent rather than dead, another irony becomes possible: After Meg and

Every story has its own needs and identity. You must give birth to a story before you can know it and see where it wants to go. Serving the tale and doing its bidding is a secret delight of authorship. You get there by trying a lot of "Maybe . . ." ideas.

Plot is the container that shapes each incident. Its episodes form the chain of cause and effect through which the central character encounters the antagonistic forces that he or she must struggle against. Getting every scene to follow inevitably from the last takes a great deal of work.

Willpower is the powerhouse in all drama, whether it be comedy, tragedy, or anything else. Most stories concern the will of main characters trying to overcome obstacles in order to effect what matters to them.

Kevin have come together, Mary could return, only to discover she has forfeited her place as Kevin's wife. The final question might then be, can Kevin and Meg be large-hearted enough to accommodate her late desire to see the child that the three of them made? Now you have a truly modern romance.

ON COMEDY

Look at how point of view is handled in the stories you write or hear. Michelle's tale anticipates the assignment in our next chapter by having two, neither of which predominates.

You can only thoroughly use a character's potential unless you explore it exhaustively, and this takes a lot of persistent and dedicated work. Comedy needs this, for it depends on the same underlying elements as tragedy no less than any other genre. The characters need heightened risks and dangers so they can struggle meaningfully for what they believe or need. Their struggles must be interesting and compelling, and the main ones must change and develop in some significant way. Laughter in your audience is the reward for getting this right.

> *Know your characters and their worlds*. Fiction fails when writer, director, or actors engage only superficially with the main characters. To become intimate with them requires that you delve untiringly into their every aspect and possibility. When this work has been done, it really shows.

Every story, no matter what genre or form of representation it takes, builds to its climax through maintaining a tension between individual and moral forces. A developed story is one in which the characters, their identity, motives, and actions exist within a balance of pressures that all feel right, all feel *inevitable* in relation to each other. Without this balance, the audience can see where the central situation should do a nosedive: If Kevin, for instance, saw that courting Meg is a losing proposition it would scuttle the story.

> *Story development* is the task of adjusting each element—whether character, motive, situation, escalation, crisis, and resolution—in relation to the others. Only then does each sequence maintain its tension and resolve into the next, and the next. It takes many, many drafts before demanding readers agree that the piece has arrived at its optimum shape. Comedy is the most demanding of all forms.

Comedy is the hardest taskmaster because there is so little margin for error or inequity. Though life is full of the far-fetched, coincidental, and inexplicable, art must strive endlessly to be credible. This makes writing it fascinating, exacting, and ultimately fulfilling. As your piece begins to make sense throughout, you feel the thrill of doing a demanding job well.

GOING FARTHER

Cooper, Pat, and Ken Dancyger. *Writing the Short Film*. 3rd ed. Butterworth-Heinemann, 2004. (Like poetry in relation to prose, the short form is in many ways harder than the long, and this book helps you grapple with them. Its explication of dramatic concepts makes a useful alternative to mine.)

Cowgill, Linda J. *Writing Short Films*. Lone Eagle, 1996. (Undoctrinaire guide to writing short films of substance, with special attention to plot and structure. Cites examples that you can find and view.)

Dancyger, Ken, and Jeff Rush. *Alternative Scriptwriting: Successfully Breaking the Rules*, 3rd ed. Butterworth-Heinemann, 2001. (Explores variations of what is possible in the nontraditional short form and includes counterstructure, working with and against genre, character distinctions and limits, character-driven as opposed to plot-driven drama, controlling tone and "the inescapability of irony," and writing samples.)

Rabiger, Michael. *Directing: Film Techniques and Aesthetics*, 3rd ed. Focal Press, 2003. (Essentials of the entire fiction filmmaking process, including writing from the viewpoint of actor, director, and screenwriter. Sections of the book—on how actors control the inner lives of their characters, for instance—will probably be especially interesting.)

19

Feature Film

Everyone dreams of writing a successful feature film, but even in barest outline it's a tall order. To keep an audience satisfied for ninety minutes takes richly detailed characters and a plot and subplots that seamlessly weave together a plethora of events. Themes have to develop, connect, and achieve a depth of meaning. In short, writing a feature screenplay takes nearly the effort, narrative material, and thematic complexity as writing a novel. In this chapter we can only go to the foot of the mountain, but making an initial outline is still significant and exciting.

The thirty-minute original fiction project asked you to explore the experience of one character, but this assignment asks more. For this you will need to,

- Depict the quests and development of two characters, making each equally interesting.
- Make your audience sympathetic to at least one point of view to which you are temperamentally opposed.

This requires that as you write, you *no longer identify exclusively with one character*. Instead, you must explore a writer's duality by creating each character's situation somewhat objectively from the outside. Then you have to be able to change hats and spend time inhabiting each main character's perceptions from the inside, even when they are imperfect or even odious. To sympathetically enter all shades and conditions of human life is now your job, as a battlefield surgeon's is to heal both friend and foe (see sidebar, "Nothing human is alien to me").

> *"Nothing human is alien to me"* (Terence, c. 195–159 B.C.). It takes great tolerance and empathy to accept as human everything that humans do. Going all the way means entering what is antithetical to your own values and treating it respectfully, sympathetically, and nonjudgmentally. This starts from the intellect, but with practice your heart will catch up with your head.

ASSIGNMENT

Assignment 19-1: Idea for a Feature Film (Featuring Two Points of View)

For your presentation, write:

1. A treatment in scene outline form.
2. A definition of the themes being handled by the story.
3. A "shopping list" of sequences and their approximate timings, which should add up to about ninety minutes.

DISCUSSION

In responding to a feature film idea, you might include:

- What do you feel about this story at a gut level?
- What genre does this story belong in and how well does it exploit this?
- What moral forces is the story handling and what thematic work is it trying to do?
- What do its two central characters represent within the film's cosmos?
- Are the stakes raised equally—as high as they might be—for each of the central characters?
- Are the obstacles that each main character faces credible and useful to show what he/she is made of?
- What is the story's crisis, and how do you feel about it?
- Does anyone develop, and if they do, is it credible and satisfying?
- Did the two characters get treated evenhandedly and in equal depth?
- How would you rate the originality of the story?
- How would you rate its overall impact?

EXAMPLE

This example happens to be historical fiction, a genre we have not yet encountered. As you see, many issues arise to make the discussion lengthy.

Example: Feature Film Idea (Paul Flanagan)

Treatment Outline. Henry, a hefty 19-year-old tobacco farmer, and John, a 21-year-old loner, stand before the Colonel inside a tent in Delaware. They have just joined the United States army in hope of assisting the American

Revolution. They stand at attention as the Colonel sits behind his desk and begins to speak. He talks to them about the tough times that lie ahead, and the state of affairs in the rebellion. It is December 29, and General George Washington and his troops are suffering bitterly in their encampment in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. They are freezing, have minimal food, and practically no clothes. They are also without their flag, for it was lost during a scuffle in Brandywine. Due to its utmost importance, the Colonel instructs Henry and John to deliver the flag to Washington in Valley Forge. The soldiers stand motionless as the Colonel dismisses them.

John and Henry are in their tent packing their belongings. John clearly doesn't want the mission. It doesn't involve battle. Henry isn't crazy about it either but he knows his time to fight will come, and he might as well follow orders.

The boys arrive in Philadelphia, and walk through the city. John, completely lost, follows Henry, who seems to know his way around. The busy streets and vendors hurry them along as they scoot around a corner and arrive at their destination.

The two boys stand firmly in a very prim and proper home. Everything is polished clean and in its proper place. An elderly woman, Betsy Ross, appears with a folded American flag in her hand. They exchange some pleasant conversation, Henry throws the flag into a satchel, and they politely leave.

With the flag in their possession, Henry and John make their way out of the city and into the vast countryside ahead. They walk along for what seems like hours; talking to each other and trying to keep up enthusiasm. Henry walks while slowly slinging the satchel by his side, once bumping it into a tree and not taking notice.

They arrive at a large creek and stop at its edge. John knowing that they must go across reluctantly begins walking through the waist-high water. Upset at having to get wet, he makes his way across as quickly as possible. Henry follows, yelling at John for taking him through the water.

Once through, Henry questions John's navigational skills and they argue. Exhausted, they make camp for the night. Henry sitting close to the fire heats some food while John paces around the area. Henry, not being able to get comfortable, uses the satchel as a seat cushion. With the food

cooked, John sits down and joins him. They eat their food and cover themselves as warmly as they can for the night.

Awake at the crack of dawn, John pops up. He scopes the area looking for their direction of travel. Uh oh! They've been going the wrong way. He wakes Henry, and John, now carrying the flag, is not any more protective of it. They climb hills, move through ditches and more creeks, until John finally collapses. To hell with this! And John tosses the satchel away. They've been tearing themselves up. John doesn't move from the ground. He's too numb from the cold and just doesn't give a damn. Two good men wasted on a stupid delivery mission. Henry picks up the flag, keeping their orders in mind, but sits down also. A moment passes as they can barely control their shivering. Uh! What was that? Redcoats! John and Henry stagger to their feet and take off. In thick woods, they are stumbling over just about everything. Whack! John runs into a branch. They keep running with their muskets at the ready. John is shot in the arm from behind. He falls. No use. They are surrounded.

Captured. They are beaten up, harassed, and taken away after a few minutes to a small British camp. They practically walked right into it. Tied to two trees, the boys are thoroughly questioned by one of the commanders as to the whereabouts of Washington. They keep their mouths shut.

Their muskets and gear have been stripped from them and laid to the side. The men go through the soldiers' belongings and find the flag. All hell breaks loose as the men tauntingly hold up the flag, swirl and throw it around. One in particular wraps himself in it and rolls on the ground.

John and Henry, feeling something they haven't felt before, grapple with their ropes. Henry can almost get free, and he would, if only a soldier didn't coincidentally shove a musket at his knees. Eventually the mocking ends, the flag is dropped, and they are left for the night.

Night arrives and Henry breaks free and unties John. They grab the flag, any food they can find, and deftly flee. Scared, they run and run and run. John looks deathly ill from his arm. He can't even move it. They spend a freezing night awake up against a tree.

The next morning they slowly begin walking along. They come upon a log cabin secluded in the woods. Before they get to the front step, they have a musket pointed at their

heads. It's a young woman, Clair. John shocked by the gun, starts dribbling tears down his cheeks. Seeing the wound, Clair lowers the musket and brings them inside.

The home is amply furnished, and in exquisite taste. There is an American flag in the background on the wall. Three young children, around 10 years old, surround the men. A not-as-tough-as-he-looks teenager is standing in the corner with a musket at his side.

Clair and the children tend to the wound and wrap both men in blankets. After a small meal, Henry and John explain what they are doing and what had happened. They learn that Washington and his troops passed by in the fall and that Clair actually met him. Seeing the soiled and bloody flag, Clair exchanges hers for theirs. If it's going to be taken to General Washington it must be clean.

At daybreak they leave. Henry helps John along. John babbles about being home, and how he wishes he could stay at Clair's.

Only slightly rejuvenated they trudge along. Snow begins falling, and after a few miles' walking it's near a foot deep. Able to go no further, they halt. At the edge of the Brandywine River they sit and freeze. Henry, spotting shelter across the river in what appears to be an overhanging rock, gets up. It's likely they'll die from the cold water, but it will definitely happen if they stay where they are. After a quick look of mutual despair, they begin crossing the fast-moving current. Half way through Henry falls. Struggling to his feet, he realizes that he doesn't have the satchel. It's being swept away by the current! Henry darts after it.

John gets to solid ground and runs along the side. Snow is coming down fast. Henry goes under. John can't find him.

He jumps in! Searching, reaching, reaching, he's got an arm. He swims and pulls. They pull up on the bank on the other side and get under the rock. Stretched out, they look at each other—motionless. Their belongings are lost. Their flag is gone. Near death and freezing, night comes.

John and Henry awaken on their backs. Wrapped in blankets they are being carried on stretchers. They were right outside Valley Forge and didn't know it.

The area looks like hell. People are freezing, dead, or dying. The two men are brought into the camp and into shelter. The troops watch in amazement as they see these two men who survived the past night carried in. The troops

tend to Henry and John and both, almost frozen to death, pass out.

The next morning John wakes up with no one else around but Henry. He wakes him and they eat the food laid out for them. Neither talk. They didn't bring the flag. John gets up and walks to the opening of the tent. He stands there motionless. Henry notices a change in John and finally speaks. He makes his way over and sees what John is looking at. The men of Valley Forge have made their own flag—from the clothes off their backs.

A few of the themes being handled are:

- The boys' journey into manhood. The entire story is symbolic of this.
- Themes of hope and struggle. The boys are up against unbelievable odds and are struggling all the way. The troops of Valley Forge are also struggling, for they are suffering in one of the worst winters ever.
- The theme of hope is also present in that the troops make their own flag in the end, taking the clothes off their backs in order to have something to fight for.
- There are also themes of compassion—compassion that Clair has for them, and compassion they have for each other.

"Shopping List" of Sequences:

1. In the tent receiving orders—10 minutes.
2. Packing belongings and heading out of town—5 minutes.
3. Arriving in Philadelphia and getting the flag from Betsy Ross—10 minutes.
4. First day's journey into the woods. They cross the creek—15 minutes.
5. First night's camp. They cook food, argue, and shiver—5 minutes.
6. They wake up and continue the second day. John is carrying the flag—5 minutes.
7. John stumbles and wants to give up—5 minutes.
8. Redcoat chase scene—5 minutes.
9. They are captured and taken back to the British camp. Entire camp scene—15 minutes.
10. They escape from the British—5 minutes.
11. Night camp—5 minutes.

12. They arrive at Clair's home and are taken in—10 minutes.
13. They leave and lose the flag in the river—10 minutes.
14. They are taken into Valley Forge and are tended to—10 minutes.
15. They wake up the next morning and see the handmade flag—5 minutes.

Approximate total—120 minutes

The strength of this idea is that it's an archetypal journey film with rite-of-passage tests that the two must pass if they and their mission are to survive. For me, the premise is, "Fire is the test of gold; adversity, of strong men."[1] Like their own emerging nation, these untried, rural partners—revolutionaries to fellow Americans, "insurgents" to the colonial British—must endure privation and disappointments on their way toward maturity.

> *Drama poses questions*. Good drama, by artfully involving us in its characters' predicaments, gets us to care how they deal with their problems. Every major scene should evoke questions, and, as we look for answers, charge us with anticipation for the scene following. Drama exists not to inform us but to draw us into exercising our faculties and judgment. Thus we rehearse for the crises ahead in our own lives.

A measure of each scene is to ask what questions it manages to pose. This lifts a scene's job from being expository (and undramatic) to evoking options and dilemmas. Here, most scenes represent tests that John and Henry must pass:

a. *Taking the challenge*—can these two raw recruits carry out the task?
b. *Manners*—can these country bumpkins behave properly in a lady's living room, and can they make their way through the big city?
c. *Endurance*—are they equal to the endless trek through the wintry countryside, especially once soaked and freezing from crossing the creek?
d. *Cooperation*—can they agree about navigation and on the worth of their purpose?
e. *Ingenuity*—can they make a meal and improvise a modicum of comfort?
f. *Endurance*—will they persist with their mission once they become lost and exhausted?
g. *Loyalty*—under the British taunts and bullying, can they keep silent about Washington's whereabouts, especially now that John is wounded and vulnerable?
h. *Ingenuity*—are they resourceful enough to escape from their uncouth captors?

1. Lucius Seneca, 4 B.C.–A.D. 65

i. *Endurance*—can their bodies and spirits survive the worsening cold, when John becomes so ill?
j. *Luck*—when they evade their pursuers, do they deserve to find a haven?
k. *Pride*—can John recover from the embarrassment of crying in front of a woman?
l. *Paradise lost*—can they leave Clair's sanctuary and return to the comfortless world of their mission, especially with John disintegrating emotionally?
m. *Endurance*—can they go through one more river, and a dangerous one, in the uncertain hope of shelter on the other side?
n. *Failure*—after they nearly die in the river and lose the precious flag, can they find any reason to go on?
o. *Grace*—can they overcome the disillusioning fact that their mission was never necessary?

Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (USA, 1941) had the sled "Rosebud" to symbolize what the newspaper magnate Kane lost in childhood, while this film has the homemade flag as its symbol of emerging American statehood and independence. By raising it, the colony defies the motherland and begins growing up. A flag is something young men will die for, so it is a nice paradox that this one gets used as a cushion, is nearly abandoned, then muddied and bloodied, desecrated by the enemy and ultimately lost in the river. Particularly ironic is that all the boys' suffering turns out to be needless. The film's resolution is its parting thought—that what must "get through" is the symbol's meaning, not any actual or particular emblem.

Figurative language. Once you begin to know your story, search its world for elements that can be made to connote abstract ideas. Poetic language includes the,

- Symbol—something material that by convention represents an abstract idea (falling sand = time running out).
- Metaphor, or imaginative analogy (shot of traffic *cut to* medical diagram of blood circulation).
- Simile, which likens one thing to another (politician deflecting complaints *cut to* water running off duck's back).
- Emblem, representing things (two snakes entwined with a dagger used to represent medical expertise).

The excessive time Paul has allotted some sequences shows there is presently insufficient material—either to fill up time or to carry the thematic weight of a major screen work. To prove this, spend five minutes with your eyes closed, imagining the first sequence when the boys get their orders. A static, expositional scene like this would probably run only about a tenth of the allotted time.

What is presently missing is individuality for John and Henry. So little are they differentiated that they could be amalgamated with no great loss. The subsidiary characters they encounter are also flat characters, in particular Clair. Such lack of complexity is perfectly normal for what this is—an early outline.

> Key objects and images give visible form to important underlying ideas. The overloaded, worn-out vehicles in *The Grapes of Wrath* (USA, 1940) are metaphors for humankind's uncertain progress through misfortune. Film audiences are likely to miss abstract ideas unless they are signaled by poetic devices.

Paul could get more mileage from his protagonists by giving them contrasting temperaments, histories, and needs. Imagine that John is married and often speaks about his wife and baby at home. If Henry were single, he could start out envious, withdrawn, and anxious about ever finding a mate. He could along the way become deeply attracted to Clair, whom we'd make unavailable just to "up the ante" (raise the stakes). Let's also try giving them mismatched temperaments, one man being "can-do" headstrong and the other cautious to excess. This will charge the space between them so they madden each other with every new predicament. Because some circumstances require speed of response, and others great premeditation, each can eventually learn to value the qualities of the other.

Complications no more remarkable than these will generate issues and conflicts that belong with men at their formative stage of life, and provide the *complications* needed in Act II. Maturing—the point of this story—means sharing, learning from others, and seeing them as equals even when they are unlike yourself.

By developing them, we begin to look not just at them but *through* their way of seeing. We see how John sees Henry, and how Henry sees John. Instead of a settled, neutral, omniscient view we come closer and experience each man's central dilemmas and feelings. This brings us closer to the richness and complexity of real life. Since we're making art, not a simulacrum of life, everything must be pared to something succinct and fast moving. For instance, a first draft by the playwright Arthur Miller would produce *eight hundred* pages. Editing and compression would knock out 690 pages. In the artistic process it is normal to first overproduce, then to cut and compress.

> *Complications* in a dramatic plot are the difficulties, obstacles, and distractions that characters encounter and that make their characteristics emerge under duress. Most of what we learn in life we learn the hard way, and this truth guides much fiction.

Short films and short stories usually have a single main character, but the novel and the feature film more often develop a tapestry of characters

and *subplots*. D. W. Griffith said he learned how to run two concurrent storylines from reading Charles Dickens. Called *parallel storytelling*, this is a useful device for condensing time and creating comparison, variety, and pace.

Can we try this here? At present we accompany the boys in every scene, but subplots could separate them and show them in relation to other characters. There could even be subplots involving only subsidiary characters. For instance:

- Betsy Ross making her flag intercut with the two young men getting their orders.
- Clair saying good-bye to her husband.
- The announcement of his death that makes Clair a widow.
- Clair's life after the young men have left intercut with their journey onward.
- Washington's troops losing their flag, then carrying on, suffering and flagless.
- Washington's men shivering as they rip apart their clothing for some unspecified purpose—later revealed to have been the making of their own flag.

Parallel storytelling helps, but doesn't overcome, the concentration on the two main characters. Let's look at this in another way: Maybe the point is that there should *be* no escape from the two heroes' shared predicament, and thus no subplots. This is, after all, a road movie, so why not stay with them on the road? Certainly their experiences can be intensified, and

Subplots and parallel storytelling: A subplot is an independent storyline that will eventually intersect with one already existing. It may contrast with the main plot, complement it, or provide more action and complication. Subplots allow:

- *Digression*. Situations, characters, and other issues can develop outside the main storyline. Because we see the main characters in other relationships, we also see new sides to them.
- *Tension*. The audience engages with characters and issues that may or may not become germane. The audience knows that subplots always eventually intersect with the main plot and wonders how and when this will happen.

Parallel storytelling allows:

- *Narrative compression*. By cutting between ongoing story lines you can pare each down to its essence.
- *Imagination*. Multiple storylines imply life's complex patterns and invite audience members to exercise their judgment, interpretation, and powers of prediction.
- *Active participation*. A complex story generating unanswered questions makes the audience into active participants rather than passive receptacles.
- *Multiple POVs*. Multiple storylines pose our imagination with the task of entering other, viable points of view because there are many ways of doing, being, and seeing.

doing more historical research could open a Pandora's box of possibilities. It could also get the period, speech, and political issues so authentic that even a historian could enjoy the results.

ON THE WRITING PROCESS AND RECEIVING CRITICISM

Since we are critiquing a writer's first draft, we will stop here. Paul would listen, make notes, and go away to ponder the ideas behind the suggestions. He would be wise to do absolutely nothing for a few days, and then to incorporate only ideas that persisted in his mind as persuasive and exciting.

As a writer you engage mainly in rewriting, and it's wise never to deal with more than the topmost layer of problems in any pass. If you overreact to criticism, you can dive into a frenzy of changes and forfeit the artistic integrity of your piece. Any self-respecting artist must hold tenaciously to the original idea's integrity. Having a current, written working hypothesis will help you do this like nothing else.

An artwork is like a tent. To make one look and function like a proper tent, you cannot alter one guy rope without adjusting all the others. It takes a lot of adjusting, and a lot of practical tent theory, before your tent matches the paragon in the catalog.

By posing questions and tackling deficiencies, writers and their collaborators keep interrogating the story as they grope toward an ever fuller and more harmonious whole. Because scene outlines bar dialogue, characters must establish themselves by actions, appearances, and emerging agendas. This is where the power lies in a visual, behavioral medium, but even literary prose gains from demonstrative actions rather than narrating. Even in outline form, where any dialogue is summarized in no more than a line or two, characters begin asserting themselves.

Writing is really about rewriting. Here are some tips about the process:

- In a new draft, don't try to fix everything. Fix only the top level of problems.
- Stay with these until you get them right. There will always be subsidiary layers of problem, and eventually your attention will fan out to the finer details.
- Frequently review your working hypothesis to test whether your piece has altered its center of gravity. This is not necessarily bad; you just need to know it and keep the story consistent with this.
- Be ready to stop. If you're making no progress, do something else till you can return with a fresh eye and fresh energy.
- Keep earlier drafts in case you need them. Perfectionism is only a hair's breadth from OCD (obsessive compulsive disorder). Some writers actually cannot stop and go on to mutilate their work. If this happens, take comfort in knowing how dedicated you are.

GOING FARTHER

Further guidance to screenwriting lies ahead in Chapter 22, Expanding Your Outline, but here are a few of the best-known screenwriting books. You are well advised to develop your work, define your needs, and only then risk rubbing shoulders with what can be an egocentric and name-dropping crowd. Look before you buy to make sure that a book's tone and scope are completely to your taste. Unless you can find a manual you really like and trust, you will remain your own best teacher.

Blacker, Irwin R. *The Elements of Screenwriting: A Guide for Film and Television Writing*. Macmillan, reissued 1996.
Field, Syd. *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting*. Dell, 1984.
Field, Syd. *The Screenwriter's Workbook*. Dell, 1984.
Horton, Andrew. *Writing the Character-Centered Screenplay*, 2nd ed. University of California Press, 1999.
Hunter, Lew. *Lew Hunter's Screenwriting 434*. Perigee, 2004.
Vale, Eugene. *The Technique of Film and TV Writing*. Elsevier, 1998.

For much debate and dialogue on screenwriting (not all of which is elevating) try http://www.cyberfilmschool.com on the Internet, and use its many links to explore further related sites.

PART V

THE EMERGING WRITER

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20

Revisiting Your Artistic Identity

To become a writer you only need be hungry to understand the questions and intricacies of living, have a readiness to write from your soul, and a willingness to write and write and write. When my friend Lois Deacon said, "Nothing is real until I have written about it," she was acknowledging, I think, that writing is far more than expressing thoughts or feelings for public appraisal. It is a process of contemplation and discovery that always promises a fuller awareness.

Most artists, whether they work alone or in company, find themselves humbled by the enormity of what life has to teach, and are more learners than leaders. Artistic vision (a misleadingly grandiose phrase if ever there was one) mostly arises from the hard truths delivered up by life rather than from the competitive ego of the artist. Imposing the ego, in any case, leads to force and arrogance, while the vision in the most moving novel, painting, song, or film always seems to arise from schooling that life has given the artist. Is writing a path that beckons to you? Could you make writing work for you, and use it to create the life you want to lead? For a while, maybe a long while, you may have to earn a living doing something workaday. But writing can be your secret life, your investment in a fuller and more meaningful future. It can become that still, personal space that is always yours and to which you can always return, no matter what. This at first will be your chrysalis stage, but once you develop as an artist, recognition will come—somehow, somewhere. There is no fast lane for writers because there is no accelerated path to becoming a full human being.

In Part II of this book you made a self-survey, and from it a conjectural profile of your artistic identity. Now you know better the subjects you prefer, the characters that intrigue you, and the genres in which you most

feel at home, you can extract a larger sense of your direction. By solving a hundred problems, you chose a singular path and have left a distinctive outline. Now you can look back and discern the pulse and bearing adopted by your creative self. Who or what you "really are" should not concern you, for that is dynamic, constantly evolving, and largely unknowable. But because you are assessing choices and responses made during a series of creative endeavors, your conclusions won't be speculative.

I suggest you avoid one obvious path, which is to take a favorite thematic concern and write about it. Unless you are very unusual, this approach seems to produce illustrated morality lessons. Though it's very tempting to teach what you know, carrying it out becomes oddly sterile and tiring. I believe the reason this fails is quite simple: We are in creative tension only with what we *don't* know, never with what we do. But how, you may ask, can I be sure that any theme or meaning will emerge if I pursue what I don't understand? The answer is that any honest creative work that engages you will always bring underlying concerns to the surface—somewhere and somehow. Keep your eyes open until it comes. It will. And often there are surprises, things you didn't know were on your mind.

YOUR CREATIVE DIRECTION

As you probably know, the approach in this book arises from the conviction that each person is already whole, and that you find out what work to do in the world by learning to hear your inmost convictions. For better or for worse, this is in fact the *only* creative work for which you can sustain passion.

So where should you go from here? What should you do with your new knowledge and enhanced writing skills? My decades of observing those who made headway, and those who did not, have shown me that many good people,

- Have hopes for their future but not plans.
- Expect school or a job to lead them.
- Allow chance to decide what's next.
- Avoid specializing in case they squelch other opportunities.
- Take whatever work is around, palatable or not, when time runs out.

This is essentially a fatalistic and passive approach that cedes initiative to fate or chance. I speak with authority because, lacking any other models, my own early career followed these lines. Since then, I have seen from those I taught in college how some people move themselves into envied

professions: They know (or decide) what they want and they willingly focus on it. This type of person,

- Enjoys the work's process as much as the product.
- Is farsighted and not dependent on immediate gratification.
- Is an active learner making vigorous use of facilities, curriculum, mentors, and collaboration with other students.
- Envisions a desired outcome then works to bring it into existence.
- Actively seeks partners who are similarly energetic and ambitious.
- Is not much concerned with peer approval.
- Uses networks to locate people and advice as he or she needs it.

In every sphere, people become good at something (and get paid to do it) because their passion and energy lies in what they do in their everyday life. Everyone wants to be around those who love what they do and do what they love.

Few, if any, are born with such commitment. It's something a person chooses. It takes some courage because you have to decide to expend the energy, courage, faith, and humor to become yourself instead of using those precious commodities to seek acceptance in the family, the group, the corporation, or the institution. It means creating and contributing from your own truest values and living with whatever are the consequences rather than trying to fit in or keep up with others.

So let's now see where your concerns may be pointing at this moment in your life.

ASSIGNMENTS

Assignment 20-1: Revisiting Your Artistic Identity

Recapitulate the themes that you originally identified as yours (in Chapter 3, Assignment 3-1) and write a paper comparing them with the patterns and common denominators that spontaneously emerged from doing the assignments. To remind you, these were:

Chapter 11: A tale from childhood
Chapter 12: A family story
Chapter 13: A myth, legend, or folktale revisited
Chapter 14: Dream story
Chapter 15: Adapting a short story
Chapter 16: News story
Chapter 17: A documentary subject
Chapter 18: Thirty-minute original fiction
Chapter 19: Feature film

Assignment 20-2: Say Where You'd Like to Go

Prepare youself to deliver a seven-minute oral presentation outlining what you've discovered about your story preferences. If it helps, make use of these sentences as prompts:

- "At the beginning I listed my *preferred themes* as . . ." [from (1) above]
- "From the work I produced, my *main themes* were . . ." [from (2) above]
- "I think I want to *make my audience realize* . . ."
- "I am interested in *making my audience feel* . . ."
- "From the writing I have been doing *my emerging vision of life is* . . ."
- "*I learned from working collaboratively with other writers* that. . . ."
- "*My next piece of writing* will probably be. . . ." (briefly describe topic, genre, any particulars).

Assignment 20-3: Ideas and Ambitions

Take four or more of the questions below, put away false modesty, and outline your ideas and ambitions:

a. During the assignments you worked with memoir, actuality, oral history, folk forms, adaptation, and original writing. Which most intrigued and energized you? Which was arduous and least energizing? Read through your writer's journal at a sitting. Next day, note what you remember. What kind of characters, places, objects, situations, actions, and themes remained in the forefront of your memory? What is the significance of this?
b. What expertise has your life given you that most other people lack? Did it emerge in your writing work? If so, how? If not, why not?
c. How did you most like to get started on a story? (With a character, a situation, a myth, a legend, a dream, an image, etc.—which?)
d. What is most scary for you to attempt as a writer? (Whatever is scary is usually something we need to tackle.)
e. What work does your conscience tell you to do? Did it emerge in your writing work?
f. Which genre really calls to you, and why?
g. Which work of yours got the best response from others, and what does this tell you?

Assignment 20-4: Setting a Personal Agenda

The always cogent Mark Twain once said, "The secret of getting ahead is getting started. The secret of getting started is breaking your complex, overwhelming tasks into small manageable tasks, and then starting on the first

one." Here's an opportunity to do just that—to assemble ideas about what you want to get, do, or accomplish in the upcoming part of your life. Based on what you decided in Assignment 20-3,

a. Make an ambitious three- to five-year professional agenda. It can list projects or classes, set out your preferred course of research and study, and specify what you'd like to produce as professional-level work.
b. Break each goal into manageable steps and set a schedule for each. Let the steps culminate in something really ambitious.
c. Lay out your three- to five-year plan using the example in Figure 20–1 as a pattern for each project. It charts the life cycle of a single project and gives target dates for the steps.

Projects will almost certainly overlap. Set yourself a path within a manageable period, and decide what you must do to get there.

Your agenda is about making things. What will you make that could conceivably be marketed in the arena you want to enter? Be bold in your plans but patient about how long each work will take. You don't want to paralyze yourself through unrealistic expectations. Allow time for research in each area, and perhaps also research into how agents operate, and how and when you should get one. Make part of your plan locating a mentor.

Plan to reward yourself when you accomplish a significant step, especially if you stay on schedule. Go somewhere new, buy yourself something

Project	Step	Start	Finish	Work entailed
Title_____ _____ _____ (10 minute fiction project)	1	1/15/06	2/10/06	Pitch ideas, develop outline
	2	1/25/06	2/1/06	Research places, people, settings, etc.
	3	2/6/06	4/1/06	Write and rewrite script
	4	3/7/06	3/20/06	Cast actors, put together crew
	5	3/15/06	3/19/06	Choose locations, secure permissions
	6	3/22/06	3/29/06	Develop cast performances
	7	4/10/06	4/15/06	Shoot
	8	4/11/06	5/10/06	Edit, research festivals to enter
	9	5/12/06	5/25/06	Make DVDs and press kit
	10	5/14/06	7/15/06	Enter 20 festivals, win awards

Figure 20–1 Agenda for a sample project.

special, do something different. And don't talk too much about your plan. It's easy to talk yourself out of following it, or to let others do it for you.

DISCUSSION AND RETROSPECTIVE

Think back over what people have said about the work you have been doing, then try these suggested topics for discussion:

- What has emerged from doing the assignments?
- What is most memorable in what people said about themselves?
- What did you take from others that you'll use for yourself?
- What is most surprising or unexpected?
- What was easier or harder than expected?
- Which accounts or stories stand out?
- What did you learn from writing the various short forms?
- What was different when you moved on to longer forms?
- What stands out about other people's artistic process in relation to your own?

The next part of this book discusses how to expand an outline into a screenplay.

PART VI

EXPANDING YOUR WORK INTO ITS FINAL FORM

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21

Story-Editing Your Outline

This chapter deals with finding and solving dramaturgical problems. If you know that your scene outline still has kinks, handcuff yourself to the nearest radiator so you don't start expanding it into its final form prematurely. Screenwriters regularly imagine that storyline problems will vanish if they write the screenplay. But this is like an architect expecting blueprint mistakes to vanish because the builder puts up the house.

A good way to scan for problems is to break the outline into movable parts. You can do this by making *scene cards*, one for each scene (see sidebar). For a lengthy story, try delivering a pitch using these as prompts: As you project your work orally you will stumble on the unsolved problems.

When discussion turns to structural alternatives, you can lay out your scene cards on a table and try them in different orders. This lets you consider structural alternatives on the spot. This is only possible while the piece remains compact and in outline form.

> *Using scene cards*. Number the scene and gum its outline to an index card. Line them up on a table and experiment with moving, combining, and eliminating scenes. Armed with scene cards you can demonstrate what will and won't work at a story conference, and concentrate on ideas and explanations. You can even invite a critic to rearrange the story and "talk through" an alternative version.

STRUCTURAL OPTIONS

Experimenting with story structure brings various options into play, depending on your priorities. Try answering these questions:

How is time handled?
- Chronologically. Screen time follows chronological order of events.
- Nonchronologically. The story unfolds according to (a) how a character perceives or remembers events, or (b) the priorities of the film's storytelling method.

Whose POV predominates?
- A character in the story. If that person is like Forrest Gump or Scarlett O'Hara, their eccentricities or limitations will make their way of seeing interestingly different from ours.
- Multiple viewpoints from several characters. Useful for showing subjective differences between each person's perceptions.
- Omniscient. The eye and ear of the film are privileged to go anywhere, and to see and hear everything and everybody. This "God's POV" is useful for epic stories whose complex events no single character can witness.

Chronological and nonchronological narratives are sometimes called *linear* and *nonlinear* storylines, and their POV arises from the logic of whoever's consciousness you nominate to organize the storytelling. A linear story, like Chris Columbus's *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (2001), follows the order of Harry's journey and holds to a straightforward plot line. Telling a story this way implies that events are being seen objectively or historically, and from the outside. Chronological storytelling is

- Logical and introduces the least complication into what may be a complex or even fantastic storyline.
- Limiting, because you can't transpose sequences without altering the cause and effect of events. You can use a dream or memory sequence to temporarily transport us back in time, or send us forward in time using an "imagination" or "what if" episode, but unless allowance for memory and imagination are built into the fabric of the piece, they will look what they are—narrative conveniences.

Rethinking POV can let you alter the handling of time. For instance, if you imagine changing a chronologically told, omniscient POV story to one told through the conflicting, subjective perceptions of its two main characters, then you have a new version, different in every way. What do you gain, what do you lose, by doing this?

Nonlinear stories seem attractively haphazard, but they are not really random at all. They simply conform to a different logic. David Lynch's

Mulholland Drive (2001) conveys great immediacy and subjectivity, but it demands much—some say too much—of its audience. The spectator must search for whatever governs the cause and effect of the events in order to settle "what really happened." By what logic did those original events become so fragmented? Of course it is Irene's amnesia that governs the associative piecemeal of Lynch's tale.

Transitions

What are you suggesting when you transition from one sequence to the next? Placing sequence descriptions on index cards and moving them around is a good way to ponder the different associations you create when you cut from one to another. Transitions from shot to shot or sequence to sequence function in different ways and carry different meanings. A transition can represent,

- Continuity, that is, a cut between shots or sequences indicating a development in,
    - Information or exposition (series of shots showing stage of demolishing a building, or cut from fledgling plants *to* vine with grapes ready to pick).
    - Action (man rises from chair *to* same man opens window so he can call out to a friend below).
    - Time (woman on bike *to* ambulance approaching emergency department *to* woman on crutches).
- Comparison, that is, there is a special significance in comparing,
    - Actions (cut from A wiping his brow *to* B wiping his car windshield).
    - Images (cut from car headlights approaching at night *to* the eyes of a hunting cat).
    - Sounds (cut or dissolve from traffic sequence *to* roar of applause at a concert).
- Dielectical, that is, there is something significant between conflicting,
    - Actions (river getting angry and swollen *to* townspeople desperately building sandbag dam).
    - Sounds (quiet woodland birdsong *to* roar of shipbuilding yard).
    - Moods (sergeant screaming at army recruits during drill *to* small boy industriously coloring a picture. Or, busy Christmas shoppers in a bright store *to* homeless people shivering under a dark parapet).
    - Scale and dimension (giant trucks to caterpillar crossing same highway).

The exquisite short film *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* (Robert Enrico, France, 1962) often contrasts frame designs or subject movements and easily

sustains our interest when it exploits these comparisons. A longer piece usually needs a larger, enclosing design. The *nouvelle vague* (new wave) French novelists of the 1950s and 1960s, such as Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute, and Michel Butor, showed the way in the novel with bold experiments in structure and texture, and the cinema has been equally inventive. Nicholas Roeg's mystery *Don't Look Now* (1973) is a veritable dictionary of narrative and structural devices. As it demonstrates, a character under great psychological pressure hardly notices time, hunger, or even the true order of events. Why is this?

Imagine a man awakening to realize that keys and his wallet have been stolen from his briefcase. He does not chronologically recall the events since he last saw his belongings. Instead, his mind rushes to whatever is most important, and his body blindly carries out what his mind dictates, so first he bangs all his pockets looking for the missing items. Then he scours his memory for any moment when someone could have got into his briefcase. Provisionally he recalls three likely occasions, then reconstructs each occasion sketchily, in search of a quick and obvious answer. There being none, he scours each occasion in detail, making and correcting memory errors, recalling "might-have-been" moments and trying comparisons between possibilities. Triumphantly he then recalls someone sitting nearby who turned away with a strange expression, then got up and abruptly left. So that was the culprit.

Emotion affects how we travel through time, space, and memory. It can block out much of the familiar world and create disorientation, or it can orient us along internally driven priorities. It can extend time (boredom from waiting for a nonexistent bus) or compress it (suddenly a wallet gone, man running for doorway, hero yells "Stop thief!"—Someone tackles the thief but he breaks free . . .).

When subjectivity is so dominant, the sequence and rhythm of events become windows into the POV character's state of mind. In an action thriller like Andrew Davis's *The Fugitive* (1993), the torrent of action and reaction alone provides most of the insight into Dr. Richard Kimble's priorities, feelings, and vulnerabilities.

Stream of Consciousness

Point of view and the handling of time are inextricably entwined. Despite the apparent objectivity of the camera, a screen story is really a stream of human consciousness. Point of view can originate in one character but migrate to another. In the storytelling itself, POV can move around as we follow the mind (or collective of minds) that inhabit the film's vision of its world, and this we can begin to think of as the unseen storyteller's stream of consciousness. For every film implies a storyteller.

Concerning story structure, try considering that,

- The subject often suggests important aspects of the story's structure.
    - A period piece depending on a complicated historical setup will require that you establish some of the characters, events, era, and backstory before the action proper can go forward.
    - A surreal story about a firefighter who secretly sets fires might employ the apparently inconsequential shifts of place, character, mood, and scale characteristic of nightmare.
    - A story about identical twins separated at birth might tell parallel stories to show serendipitously similar events until they finally meet.
    - A film about an archeologist might go chronologically backward, digging a metaphorical trench downward through layers of time and coming to rest at some point of origin.
- Genre influences a story's structure. A story set in India might borrow from Indian dramatic repertoire and structure its story by a succession of moods rather than by Hollywood high-concept plotting. A story about the persecution of women deemed witches in the seventeenth century might use scenes arranged as a series of tableaux and imitate the paintings of the period.

A story can also mix antithetical narrative logics and alternate between moods and structures. In a tale about a baffled psychiatrist trying to reach a soldier who is suffering post-traumatic hallucinations, the narrative line might cut between the two very different points of view, each having its own mood. The doctor is in the present, while the patient has long periods of reliving past terrors, or even events that may be imaginary or misremembered. Depending on whose POV we share at any particular moment, the language of the movie will shift back and forth radically.

Roundup

We can say this: No story's structure need be cast in the boring, chronological mold of mainstream realism. Structure and flow can arise from mood and context, association with similar stories, or from the logic of its characters and their psychology or mood. Film is a reproduction of consciousness, and each character may be thinking and acting from differing inner or outer compulsions. The inner and outer may be in harmony, or they may be in conflict. The ultimate arbiter to all this is the unseen storyteller whose hand creates the story itself.

Whatever option you take, your audience should find the story's structure and language true to its sources in its characters, narrative style, topic, genre, or message.

TROUBLESHOOTING

Here are some recommendations designed to flush out problems or provide solutions:

Get us involved with the main characters quickly. Don't waste time working up an atmosphere, introducing us slowly to the rugged landscape, and so on. A deliberately slow pace was all right for nineteenth-century vicarage readers with excess time on their hands, and can still work with a captive audience in the theater, concert hall, or cinema. But wherever art is consumed alone, your audience will turn to other things unless you boldly claim their attention. Grab us with action that commits the characters to a compelling situation. This is the "contract" you strike with your audience. It is good to start with momentum—something Shakespeare, with a whole company to feed, knew very well. His plays often start in a tumult of action that leaves you gasping to catch up.

> *A "contract" is implied whenever drama begins*. Clues planted for the audience suggest what the piece will deal with and how it will be handled. An effective contract (also called the *hook*) lures the audience into the piece and makes them suspend disbelief.

Let the audience know quickly what the piece will be about. Your screen tale is fatally handicapped if minutes roll past with no hint of its focus. It's like waiting in one of those failing restaurants where nobody thinks to give you a menu. Make a quick course of study to see how others begin their works: run the first minutes of several feature films to see how soon and in what ways the successful ones lay claim to your attention. Do the same with several novels. Tolstoy begins *Anna Karenina* with: "All happy families are alike but an unhappy family is unhappy after its own fashion." Right away he pops you in the face; happy families are tedious, and the rest are made vital by their conflicts. Even if you disagree with the assertion, you surely read on.

Hide exposition. To realize we are being briefed by the author is like catching the puppeteer at work, so make sure you camouflage exposition—about the era, place, backstory, characters, relationships, people's agendas—by feeding it visually or hiding it within action.

Double-check for vital expository information. It's fatally easy for the writer, so familiar with the basics, to omit something vital. Train yourself to read with a newcomer's lack of foreknowledge. This is a discipline all on its own.

Keep exposition minimal, and space it out. When you ask your audience to absorb new situations or meet new characters, hold back all information extraneous to the immediate situation till later, or risk your audience gagging on an informational overload. Hold each item of information back until we *really* need it.

Whose story is it? Check whose POV you are suggesting, and consider whose should prevail. If this remains a problem, it means you haven't decided who or what the piece is about. Everyone experiences this dilemma from time to time. A good way to get answers is to experimentally privilege other possible POVs. Under any new conditions, rewrite your working hypothesis. This is fascinating if unsettling work.

> *Inhabit each character*. In separate readings, inhabit each character's reality for the length of the piece. Sketch an interior monologue as you go to make yourself explore the character's subjective needs, feelings, and perceptions—even when he or she is off screen. This will help reveal what is missing. It can lift flat characters from being inanimate foils, and make them into round characters because they begin acting from their own complex agenda of needs, even in a brief appearance.

"*Make them laugh, make them cry, but make them wait*." Storytelling is like striptease and must keep the audience guessing. Disrobe too fast, and you've blown your act. Make sure your audience has questions to answer, dilemmas to judge, and contradictions to weigh. Keep your audience members wondering so they exercise their minds and emotions, and stay in that wonderful state of anticipation.

Keep the story moving as new characters come on the scene. Don't stop the action to let us meet a new character. Action is rhythm, and in jazz you don't stop the rhythm section when you bring in a new soloist.

Don't invent a new character to solve a plot problem. If she is indispensable, make her a functioning part of the story well before you have her perform that vital plot function.

Make sure the characters have enough opposing and conflicting qualities. Conflict is at the heart of all drama, so make sure your characters have differing temperaments, social backgrounds, habits, likes, dislikes, and agendas. This will ensure the kind of friction in their relationships that drama needs. All interesting characters have internal conflicts as well as external ones. This indicates their unfinished business in life. Many a person hitches up with his opposite as part of his quest.

Know what your characters are trying to get or do. Having decided a character's dominant motivation, the inexperienced writer often fails to make that character evolve. The most important question to keep asking during a rewrite is, "What is this character trying

to get or do *now*?" Keep searching for answers to this simple little question, and you will create characters who are questing and dynamic instead of lumpen and monolithic.

Raise the stakes, but keep them credible. Whatever stops a character from getting or doing what he or she desires can often be intensified. That makes each character have to work harder, suffer more, and play for higher stakes. Drama about nice middle-class people leading materially comfortable and calm lives is flat because you can raise the stakes only by introducing the sensational. Make real life your teacher: What really creates tension in regular people's lives? Don't settle for a formula; write character biographies for your characters so each is unique. View documentary films about so-called ordinary people to see exactly how and where you got information about each person's life.

Vary how you act on your audience, but maintain the intensity of demand. Novice fiction is often monotonous because scenes are too similar in type, rhythm, or content. Variety and contrast keep us fresh. Another common fault is making inconsistently high or low demands, sometimes overworking the audience by compressing or truncating a complex situation, and sometimes boring it with indulgent late-night discussions or artful montages about the coming of spring. Scan through your piece with the "intensity meter" in hand and assess each scene's demands on the audience. Give them ratings between 0 and 10. Then draw a graph plotting how all the sequences play. Your curve should "breathe" between high and low intensities throughout its length, and crescendo at a logical place in the overall design. If it doesn't, rearrange scenes and rewrite.

See that climaxes are well placed. A barometric chart for your entire story as discussed in Chapter 8 will show where the high points lie in each scene and whether they are high enough. These are the climaxes, and one should serve as the turning point for the whole story. How well distributed are they? Are they bunched? Do they come too early in the story, leaving you with too much falling action? Try redistributing them by transposing scene cards. This may in turn reveal that you are using the wrong point-of-view character, starting the story too early or too late, or taking too long to establish the characters' problems.

Kill your darlings. Any scene, no matter how dear to the writer, is excess baggage if the piece works without it. The same is true for characters. Less is always, always more. Remove,

- Any dialogue whose meaning can be rendered through action.
- Any unnecessary character.
- Any unnecessary scene.
- Everything and everybody lacking a clearly defined dramatic function.

Check for multiple endings. How your story takes leave of its audience is what the audience most remembers. *Smoke Signals* (1998), Chris Eyre's funny and endearing film about life on an Indian reservation, has three endings and suffers because of it. This disables a story's most potent weapon—its parting shot. Multiple endings seem to happen because the makers want to convey too many messages. Look rigorously at your piece, identify its thematic backbone, and ditch whatever isn't the single, most effective conclusion.

Keep rethinking your working hypothesis. With each new draft, the story's premise changes. Updating it is uphill work, but it makes you revisit your intentions, which often change. You need to know fully what you are doing—and (let it be said loud and clear) *most people do not*. Remaking the hypothesis will also help you design the right ending.

Put your work away for a few days before rereading it. Partial blindness from the glare of overfamiliarity is a writer's occupational hazard. Get some distance; at the very least you should be able to see what any newcomer can effortlessly see in your work.

Seek audience reaction and feedback. It's an audience medium, so begin learning early from your masters, the audience. Ask open questions, and don't argue or explain. Listen, then you will learn.

YIELDING TO THE DRAMATIC CONVENTIONS

By now you probably have the queasy feeling that your tale is being taken over by outside forces. And you are right. These are the dramatic conventions asserting themselves, forces from human history that bear as powerfully on everything you do in the arts as the moon does when it acts on the oceans. So before we move to expanding an outline, let's pause to consider why conventions possess such invasive authority.

Every writer, knowingly or otherwise, operates from the bloodlines of their art form. I, for instance, am working to make adequate use of the English language as I write, for to do less would risk losing the attention of you, my good and faithful reader. Languages are agreements about meaning that have evolved of necessity. We learn them as conventions, use them, and pass them on to our children. Dramatic and poetic conventions are just as functional and have existed just as long. They are accepted ways of doing things and affect a work's:

- Length. We expect different things of different lengths of work.
- Language. We expect interesting discourse. Metaphor, symbol, simile, analogy, and rhythms are all part of a complex and changing

dialogue between audiences and artists, as important as they are to song.

- Genre. We expect particular families of work to handle particular topics in particular ways. A film about a boy growing up might be a coming-of-age movie or a docudrama but is unlikely to qualify as a stag movie or slapstick comedy. A story about a violent crime is usually cast as a mystery, and horror is the usual genre for stories about threats from the supernatural. A genre helps us enter the story and focus on its finer points.
- Medium. We bring different expectations to poetry, songs, short stories, animation films, documentary, experimental films, *avant-garde* theater, television, modern dance, and so on. The medium is also the message.
- Plot. The contest between individual will and the rules of the universe that provides the dramatic tension depends to some extent on current preoccupations, the needs of the society making and consuming the work, tradition, and current doubts and beliefs.
- Style. An author or director makes stylistic choices concerning mood, rhythms, point of view, density of language, poetical allusions, and individual voice. The latter is more inherent than chosen.
- Morality and ethics. Most artworks exploit the critical dichotomies in the human mind such as concern about good and evil. Right versus wrong is not as interesting as the gray areas where right battles right.

Conventions survive and prosper because they enable us to freely exchange narratives. Any writer, actor, dancer, songwriter, or comedian who enthralls us is making skillful use of both old and new. Film, only a century old, is conjoined to its sister arts and cannot help but extend and amplify older forms of discourse, particularly, of course, those that are visual and linguistic. Genres and structural forms are parts of this cultural connections kit, so you can often get ideas and help from other art forms.

Like a language, a genre is a set of norms that should ease communication, not imprison it. When you expand your outline, you should keep in mind what the audience expects and work with that. Your audience expects particular things, but you may not give it entirely what it expects, for that is part of how you maintain dramatic tension. Storytellers keep things lively by splicing genres and types of discourse together as a way to push or subvert expectations. The conventions, though old, are always in change and always in negotiation. Like spoken language, they must evolve if they are to remain potent and useful.

Reaching a wide audience poses a quandary for the teller. By reaching overmuch toward what the audience knows, the teller may lose the source

of the tale's authenticity and of his or her own "voice." Conversely, should the teller reject common ground and focus inwardly on personal concerns, he or she may end up making references that are too arcane for others to recognize or care about.

Between these extremes lies a noble expectation—that stories of depth and universality arise from individual experience, concern, and conscience. By deeply touching others, storytellers diminish the existential void between us. Most importantly, any work can be both popular and have depth and quality. Over the centuries Shakespeare has remained both a bestseller and the ultimate poet and dramatist. There is no high art and low art except in the minds of cultural snobs. There is no inherent conflict between "good" and "popular." By working with the culture you know most intimately, you can infuse a populist work with the underlying seriousness that has always distinguished work that looks at the human condition in a responsible way.

This begins with the relationship between author and audience. The skilled storyteller does not treat us as empty vessels waiting to be filled. Instead, he or she invokes a mental and emotional dialogue within us, knowing how much we need to interact with what we see and hear. Lately the documentary is riding high because it treats people as mature, questing, questioning adults. Not much popular visual entertainment is doing that.

The artistic process involves marrying your intentions to the conventions and connecting with the hearts and souls of an audience or reader. In writing, filmmaking, or other art forms that address the public, the ideation process and the relationship with our audience are the first, vital steps in this process. Audiences and creators share a common drive—to replace the stalking desolation of existence by exploring the beauty and disquieting undercurrents in this tragically brief lifespan we get. We need to discover "what is." And we need to do it now, before it is too late. If you are active, inventive, and unflinching, you can hold the culture in your hands and change it.

GOING FARTHER

Dannenbaum, Jed, Carroll Hodge, and Doe Mayer. *Creative Filmmaking from the Inside Out: Five Keys to the Art of Making Inspired Movies and Television*. Simon & Shuster, 2003. (Three experienced film teachers look at how to use introspection, inquiry, intuition, and interaction in order to create impact in filmmaking. The book is particularly strong on the artist's ethical responsibilities and the danger of unconscious stereotyping. Includes many practical workouts.)

Grant, Barry Keith. *Film Genre Reader III*. University of Texas Press, 2003. (Concentrates on analyzing genre in American cinema.)

Lopez, Daniel. *Films by Genre: 775 Categories, Styles, Trends and Movements Defined, with a Filmography for Each*. McFarland, 1993. (Guide to international genre distinctions applied throughout film history.)

Roemer, Michael. *Telling Stories: Postmodernism and the Invalidation of Traditional Narrative*. Rowman and Littlefield, 1995. (An excellent and challenging book about the historical, philosophical, and psychoanalytic underpinnings of storytelling. It covers antiquity to postmodernism, and begins with the unsettling assertion that "Every story is over before it begins." Erudite and scholarly more than prescriptive, it is nonetheless in highly accessible language and makes you reexamine every assumption you ever made about narrative. The author maintains that story is ultimately an aspect of the ritual by which humankind equips itself to handle destiny. Roemer, himself an accomplished filmmaker, is professor of film and American studies at Yale University.)

22

Expanding Your Outline

If you have a strong and well-tested outline, you can now expand it into a film screenplay, documentary proposal, stage play, short story, or novel. While you do this, expect new ideas to surface, ones that will challenge your original intentions and even drive you to modify the original concept. Strong characters in fiction, for instance, are notorious for elbowing their author aside and taking over the story.

Most authors have to write to discover what they are really writing about, so an outline may in retrospect turn out to have been a preliminary skirmish. This is particularly true for character-driven work, but in plot-driven or shorter works much of the struggle is completed during the outline stage.

As you expand your work, try to work from your own resources as long as possible, and look to guidance from books or teachers only once you have intractable problems to solve. If the guidelines that follow seem sketchy, it's because anything more comprehensive would probably become suffocating. Here are tips for each medium and a short bibliography where you can find more specialized help—if and when you need it.

Make yourself write regularly, even when you don't feel like it. A little work done regularly accomplishes more and better work than sporadic marathons. Don't be afraid to work out of chronological order on sections you find most appealing. Everyone works a little differently, and inspiration is most likely to come from tackling whatever really fascinates you and by working in your own way.

When you prepare to submit something, make sure your word-processor's spelling and grammar checks have been turned on. When you print your opus, ask one (or better, two) literate friends to closely proofread it. Nothing consigns work faster to oblivion than typos and spelling mistakes. Conversely, nothing commands respect more than consistent craft and style.

WRITING FOR THE SCREEN

As you write your screenplay, concentrate on the dramatic and aesthetic aspects of cinema, not the technological. Bear in mind what is affordable to produce and what will make full use of the medium. If you imagine you are writing primarily for the silent cinema, you won't go far wrong.

- Aesthetics:
    - Cinema is a visual, juxtapositional, even melodramatic medium—so don't fall into using it like theater or literature. Tell your story visually, not verbally. Write images, action, reaction, and behavior rather than conversation.
    - Keep point of view in mind so you give us the subjectivity of the characters and their storyteller.
    - Underinform rather than overinform. Work your audience's imagination.
    - Use the audience's knowledge of genre and their expectations.
- Visualization:
    - Choose subjects, characters, and settings for their visual and behavioral strengths.
    - Work to create strong, different moods in each scene.
    - Alert us to subtext through visual juxtaposition, symbolic imagery, and metaphors.
- Dialogue and sound:
    - Reproduce natural conversation by using its essence, never its prolixity.
    - Make each character speak with his or her own voice, not yours (research character types with a camcorder and transcribe what they say).
    - Use the emotional associations and narrative possibilities of sound. It's a powerful component in creating mood (research your locations).
- Economy:
    - Plan to use existing present-day settings and situations whenever possible.
    - Keep the cast small.
    - Avoid special effects.
    - Avoid period costuming, sets, or props.
    - Set stories locally if you can.
- Collaboration:
    - Cinema depends on director, actors, and technicians. Trust their input and don't smother their contributions by overwriting.
    - Solicit other people's reactions before releasing anything as finished.

Standard Screenplay Format

The industry screenplay standard is the ultimate in convenience, and no professional will look at anything else. A page in standard layout yields roughly a minute of screen time (see Figure 22–1). A screenplay is unbound and secured by a single brad through its top left-hand corner so that an interested party can copy it for distribution to other readers. See bibliography for copyright and other protection.

Font: Courier, 12 point, 10 pitch type, nonproportional spacing. No variations.

Margins: Left, 1.5 inches. Right, 1.0 inch. Top, 0.5 inches to page number, 1.0 inch to the body. Bottom, 0.5 to 1.5 inches, depending on position of page break.

Pagination and running head: Number the pages and include a running head to identify screenwriter and film title.

Spacing: Single.

Title page: Title and author centered and one-third down page, then flush right at the bottom of page put the author's name, social security number, and contact information.

Page breaks: Never break scene heading from scene, or character's name from their line.

Scene headings (also called slug lines). Each scene begins with a flush-left capitalized scene heading that lists:

- Interior or exterior (abbreviated as INT. or EXT).
- Location description.
- Time of day (DAY, NIGHT, SUNSET, DAWN etc.).

Body Copy. Scene or action description, mood setting, stage directions in single spacing. Runs the width of the page but double-spaced away from scene headings and dialogue. Sometimes called *stage directions*, body copy should:

- Evoke situation and characters in minimal but colorful language.
- Stipulate nothing irrelevant or impractical.

```
FADE IN:

EXT. SUBWAY STATION  EVENING

Poor part of town, garbage on sidewalk. KATIE, early 30s,
stocky build, labors along carrying a heavy shopping bag.
At sound of APPROACHING TRAIN, she breaks into an
awkward run.

                        KATIE
                    (to herself)
           Damn it, I'm not going to make it.

EXT. SUBWAY PLATFORM  EVENING

Katie clatters down the steps on to platform and looks at
the departing train. A hand touches her shoulder. She
whirls in defensive alarm, then her expression changes
to wonderment.

                        KATIE
              How did you get here so fast?
              You frightened me.

VADIM, early 40s, dark clothing and greying beard, smiles
at her quizzically. He takes the shopping bag, looks
inside, and tearing open a packet of crackers offers her
one, which she takes reluctantly.

                        VADIM
                     (chewing)
              They don't know I'm here yet?

                        KATIE
                Of course not! This time
                it's your call, not mine.

Vadim opens his coat, pulls a yellow, snake-like ferret
from an inner pocket. He wraps the animal around his neck
like a muffler and dusts his nose with its tail. Katie
draws back afraid. Vadim is more amused than ever.

                        KATIE
             It smells!  I can smell it from
             here! What is it anyway?

Vadim goes to give it to her, but instinctively she
retreats.
```

Figure 22–1 Example of standard screenplay format.

- Set a scene impressionistically, never comprehensively. (Example: "Unmade single bed, ashtray full, underwear overflows from drawers, crucifix hangs crookedly.")
- Set the scene mood boldly, briefly, and evocatively. ("Raw dawn over wet, lackluster streets" is enough to fire the reader's imagination and inspire the cinematographer.)
- Give action descriptions that leave room for interpretation. ("York looks around nervously," not "York puts his right-hand index finger to the center of his lower lip and inches forward to see around the gloomy, gray-painted stairway.")
- Capitalize character names in body copy only when they first appear in a scene. Repeat them thereafter in lower case.

Dialogue. Sections are:

- Headed by character's name in capitals and tabbed across to around 4.0 inches.
- Block indented and set between reduced margins (left 3.0 inches, right 2.5 inches.)
- Preceded and followed by a space.
- Single spaced.
- Specially marked when dialogue must be split across a page break. Put (MORE) just before page break, and (CONT'D) after character's name on following page.
- Accompanied only when strictly necessary by stage directions inside brackets.
- Made most effective when,
    - Brief and compressed.
    - Distinguished by the individual flavor and rhythm of particular speaker.
    - A verbal action—that is, trying to act on someone or elicit something.
    - Accompanied by a strong subtext. Characters in films, like those in life, seldom say directly what they really feel or want but express it indirectly in subtextual ways.
    - Focused on what the audience cannot see, not what it can. (It would be ludicrous and redundant for a character to remark, "That's a smartly cut brown tweed coat you're wearing.")

Camera and editing directions:

- Are a distraction and the sure sign of amateurism. Never use them.
- Transitions like "Cut to," "Dissolve to," are capitalized and used between scenes *only* if they are indispensable to understanding. Place consistently either flush left or flush right.

Sound and music directions:

- Specify sounds only to advance the mood or narrative.
- Never specify music or even its placement unless it has special meaning to the plot.

The screenplay format is a trap for the unwary. By its theatrical layout it suggests that movies are fueled by dialogue, when memorable films are mostly visual and behavioral, not verbal. To see how minimal a screenplay should be, examine one for a film that you admire. Be careful you are reading the original screenplay, and not an afterthought transcription of the finished film.

You can write screenplays perfectly well by setting up your word-processor's tabbing. But to write effortlessly in correct format, invest in a screenwriting software program, such as Movie Magic or Final Draft. They will automatically format screenplays, TV episodes, stage plays, and even novels. Expect a variety of excellent features including a spell checker, Thesaurus, and an index-card and outlining feature that lowers the agony of wholesale rewriting. Check out the latest versions and offers at http://www.screenplay.com/, http://www.writersstore.com/, and www.finaldraft.com. Educational software companies like Academic Superstore (www.academicsuperstore.com/) offer substantial discounts for bona fide educators and students. The Screenwriters Guild of America (at www.screenwritersguild.org) and the Writers Guild of America (www.wga.org) both review writing software. The WGA site also offers model contract forms and a wealth of other information. See Robert M. Goodman's "What's the Story?"—a roundup that includes a features comparison chart and reviews of software for helping to create stories. The author warns that the latter depend on arcane, jargon-heavy theories of story structure.

There is a dizzying profusion of texts about screenwriting. Beware of esoteric methods and formulae promising shortcuts to success in Hollywood. Be equally skeptical of high-priced workshops that promise to tell inside professional secrets in a single weekend workshop. You can get a preview of one by renting Spike Jonze's comedy *Adaptation* (2002). Written by screenwriter Charlie Kaufman, it tells a self-reflexive story about a screenwriter called Charlie Kaufman who is struggling to adapt a real book called *The Orchid Thief* (about an orchid thief . . .). Amid this self-referential hall of mirrors the screenwriter debates screenwriting's conundrums with his screenwriting twin brother. Expect much entertainment and not a little cynical instruction.

To learn about screenwriting from a film director's perspective, look at the screenwriting chapters of my fiction-directing text, *Directing: Film Techniques and Aesthetics*. They describe how a director assesses and interprets a screenplay, and will complement the work you are doing here.

DOCUMENTARY FILM PROPOSAL

While a fiction film begins with a blueprint and moves forward by linear stages, a documentary is a more circular entity that evolves from researching, conceptualizing, directing, and editing—much of this taking place in a zigzag, associative relationship. The documentary proposal describes a hypothetical movie based on research and informed expectation. To explain how you arrive at one would take excessive circumstantial discussion here, but below is a booklist to help you.

Documentary proposals are a pain to do but indispensable for communicating your purposes and for raising financial or other support. Writing and rewriting them is also the very best way to distill your ideas about your intended film's style, content, dramatic structure, and thematic meaning.

There is no separate professional designation of writer in documentary as there is in fiction film, nor is there a meaningful way to write about a documentary without insider knowledge of production details. To propose a documentary convincingly and raise money you will either need to extensively observe professionals at work or use a how-to documentary production book to amass your own documentary experience. My widely used *Directing the Documentary* will take you onward from the work you've done here. Making documentary is a wonderfully useful experience for fiction writers or directors to have under their belts.

PLAYS

The power of theater lies in the palpable presence and interaction of the characters. Because actors are three-dimensional people, not shadows on a screen, a good live performance is one that is being created as you watch.

Plays draw us deep into human predicaments because they are driven by strong characters. The theater is thus a laboratory for human relationship, whether it be the rivalrous friendship of the nuclear physicists in Michael Frayn's *Copenhagen*, the agony of Shakespeare's Hamlet at being inadequate to protest his father's murder, or Linda Loman protecting her tired husband from his sons as he approaches suicide in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Nothing about the human heart is beyond the theater.

Plays can use abstract, minimalist settings to suggest time and place, and are not forced like cinema by its photography to contend with constantly encroaching realism. Though modern theater is astonishingly agile, you must still sometimes get an actor bodily from one part of the stage to another if you specify a cut from Sydney to Soho.

Many cities nowadays have a theater company that will "workshop" new plays—that is, actors will read them through on the stage, and audience and players will afterwards critique your work and suggest solutions to its problem areas. However primitive this may be as a performance, it exposes a play to an audience and helps it evolve. Such events also publicize new work. I have seen screenplays go through a similar process to good effect.

Standard Playwriting Format

Stage actors have to rehearse while carrying the text in one hand, so play format crams a lot of text on the page (see Figure 22–2). Ideas of what is standard vary, but here are some pointers:

Font: 12 point Times or other plain, easy-to-read type.

Binding and pagination: Play copies take a beating in use, so print yours on strong paper and bind securely in a "term paper" cover with inbuilt brads. Number pages sequentially.

Title page: With play title, author's name, and author's contact information.

Preliminary pages: With,

- A list of characters and thumbnail portrait of each.
- A synopsis of the play.
- The assignment of male/female roles, and which parts can be doubled (played by the same actor).
- Any special set or technical requirements.

Dialogue pages: With,

- Names of characters capitalized and centered above their lines.
- Dialogue aligned to the left margin, 1.5 line-spaced, and running across the entire page.

Stage directions: Between parentheses on a separate line, single-spaced, and indented as little as one tab or as much as halfway across the page.

Scenes: Each numbered and titled, with their termination marked "Scene Ends."

Play ending: Marked "The End."

ACT II
Scene 1

(Megan and Art's apartment, night. Rickety furniture, doorway leading off to a bedroom. MEGAN, pregnant, is trying to follow sewing directions at an old treadle sewing machine. ART, just got up, enters from the bedroom, putting on his outdoor jacket. Seeing her look up, he gives her a perfunctory kiss)

ART
Hey babe, don't wait up. I'm going to Blackie's to see Tommy.

MEGAN
You're going out? You said you were going to stay home...

ART
Didn't know Tommy was going to be in town.

MEGAN
You said you weren't going out so much. You *said* so.

ART
But this is Tommy. Best friend from the Detroit days (she is silent) You know, *Tommy.*

MEGAN
But we promised we'd see your mom.

ART
Another day, we'll do it. Tommy called up when you were asleep.

MEGAN
That's the second time you've skipped out on your mom.

ART
Oh boy. Will ya quit naggin'? I'll call her from the bar.

MEGAN
Art, she's got terminal cancer.

Figure 22–2 Example of standard playwriting format.

NOVEL OR SHORT STORY FORMAT

How to submit a novel manuscript varies slightly among publishing houses, so follow their instructions to the letter. The preferred layout allows a busy editor to estimate the finished work's page count and estimate production costs. By using your word processor's style feature while you write, you can globally reset margins, indentation, font, or headings later for submission to different publishers. A really detailed breakdown of the conventions for novel format can be found at http://eirefuryssanctuary.bravepages.com/novelformat.html. Here are brief guidelines:

Font: Depends on publisher but Courier, 12 point proportional spacing is usual. Do not justify your text—it should be aligned to the left margin and left ragged on the right.

Title page: Title and author centered and one-third down page, author's name beneath, centered, and contact information flush right at the bottom of page.

Margins: Right and left, 1.5 inches. Top and bottom, 1.0 inches.

Pagination and running head: Number the pages and include a running head with title and author's name. Print on one side of the paper only and use heavy (20 lb.) paper stock.

Spacing: Double spacing between lines and no extra space between paragraphs.

Paragraph indent: 1 inch.

Chapter numbers and titles: Centered, with "Chapter One" one line above chapter title. Leave two double line spaces before first paragraph. New chapters start on a new page.

Extra space in the text: If you insert extra space, mark it with the pound sign (# # #) so the typesetter can see the space is not accidental.

Style: For guidance over punctuation, use of spaces, indentation, and suchlike use a style manual such as Joseph Gibaldi's *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 6th ed. (Modern Language Association of America, 2003). The awful precision it calls for enables typesetters to reproduce your work with the fewest errors.

GOING FARTHER

An excellent resource for the aspiring media writer is "The Writers Room" at the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) website, www.bbc.co.uk/writersroom. It contains hints, tips, and interviews with writers of different genres. Go to their "Scriptsmart" section for formatting models (feature screenplay, the TV script, the BBC house style for radio scripts, as well as formats for the UK stage, the U.S. stage, and even for comic books). At the Writers Guild of Great Britain (http://cgi.writersguild.force9.co.uk/) or at the Writers Guild of America (WGA, www.wga.org/) you'll find goldmines of information such as interviews, news of the profession, and cautionary hints about overexposed topics. Also try *Zoetrope: All-Story* at www.all-story.com/, a "quarterly literary publication founded by Francis Ford Coppola in 1997 to explore the intersection of story and art, fiction and film."

Reading professional journals, websites, blogs, and e-zines is a good way to peer inside professional circles and absorb their concerns and discussion topics. When you need to pass as a professional, this is an excellent way to get ready to walk the walk and talk the talk. Acting is not just for actors.

Below are many useful texts and manuals, but browse them online or in your bookstore until you see what calls to you. Good book information can be found free at websites like The Writers Store at http://www.writersstore.com, Amazon at www.amazon.com, or Barnes and Noble at www.barnesandnoble.com. The latter two are vast online bookstores that often let you see chapter lists and sample text. They also make it easy to find allied titles or books by a favorite author. For used copies at reasonable prices, try either Barnes & Noble's used books or the gargantuan Abebooks website at www.abebooks.com. Entering "screenwriting" as the search-engine keyword, I was offered 4,725 titles, with the first 50 priced under $2.00. Be aware however that bargains may be disfigured by annotations or from having served as someone's lunch plate.

Here are some helpful books:

Legal

Donaldson, Michael C. *Clearance & Copyright*, 2nd ed. Silman-James, 2003. (Protecting your work, and negotiating with others about theirs. Rights, releases, partnerships, registering copyright, fair use, and a whole lot of other heart-stopping issues.)

Film

Dancyger, Ken, and Jeff Rush. *Alternative Scriptwriting: Writing beyond the Rules*. Focal Press, 1995. (Deals with alternative and experimental forms but offers

a succinct approach to mainstream ones, too. Exercises, case studies, personal scriptwriting, and non-Hollywood work.)

Egri, Lajos. *The Art of Dramatic Writing*. Simon & Schuster, 1977. (A classic and still influential text that is strong on dramatic construction. "One of the few cogent books about dramatic writing published in the last 100 years"—Robert M. Goodman, WGA website.)

Field, Syd. *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting*. Dell, 1982. (A punchily written favorite, with much good advice on stylistic and structural aspects. Useful if you want to succeed in classic Hollywood terms but many people find him overformulaic and alienating. Chillingly revealing about what producers look for.)

Field, Syd. *The Screenwriter's Workbook*. Dell, 1984. (Exercises and step-by-step instruction. Same caveat.)

Field, Syd. *Four Screenplays: Studies in the American Screenplay*. Dell, 1994. (Analytical script dissection of several popular films: *Thelma and Louise, Terminator 2: Judgment Day, The Silence of the Lambs, and Dances with Wolves*. Shows how these scripts function, and includes interviews with writers.)

Lumet, Sidney. *Making Movies*. Vintage, 1996. (Though not specifically about screenwriting, this conveys lucidly and modestly what making feature films is really like.)

Rabiger, Michael. *Directing: Film Techniques and Aesthetics*, 3rd ed. Focal Press, 2003. (A complete manual for film directors, with a strong emphasis on authorial responsibility. See in particular Part III ["Writing and Story Development"], Part IV ["Aesthetics and Authorship"], and Part V ["Preproduction"].)

Rabiger, Michael. *Directing the Documentary*, 4th ed. Focal Press, 2004. (Complete documentary manual with plenty of preparation on aesthetics and writing the proposal.)

Rosenthal, Alan. *Writing, Directing, and Producing Documentary Films and Videos*, 3rd ed. Southern Illinois University Press, 2002. (How to write, direct, and produce, especially for the television industry.)

Theater

Dow, Jan Henson, and Shannon Dow. *Writing the Award-Winning Play*. iUniverse Inc., 2003.

Garrison, Gary. *Perfect 10: Playwriting and Producing the 10-Minute Play*. Heinemann 2001. (The short play is an excellent way to break in.)

Gooch, Steve. *Writing a Play*, 3rd ed. A & C Black, 2001.

Hall, Roger A. *Writing Your First Play*, 2nd ed. Elsevier, 1998.

Hart, Anne. *How to Write Plays, Monologues, or Skits from Life Stories, Social Issues, or Current Events*. iUniverse Inc., 2004. (A good accessory for anyone working in soap opera, comedy, or theater that is political and/or satirical—all genres that keep a weather eye on current events.)

Hatcher, Jeffrey. *The Art and Craft of Playwriting*. F & W Publications, 2000.

MacLoughlin, Shaun. *Writing for Radio: How to Write Plays, Features, and Short Stories That Get You on Air*, 2nd ed. How To Books, 2001. (National Public Radio has stations all over the United States making radio features and documentaries, as does the BBC in England and the CBC in Canada—to name but a few.)
McLaughlin, Buzz. The *Playwright's Process: Learning the Craft from Today's Dramatists*. Watson Gupthill Publications, 1997.
Packard, William. *Art of the Playwright: Creating the Magic of the Theatre*. Thunder's Mouth Press, 1997.
Polsky, Milton. *You Can Write a Play*! Applause Theatre Book Publishers, 2001.
Sossaman, Stephen. *Writing Your First Play*. Prentice Hall, 2000.
Sweet, Jeffrey. *The Dramatist's Toolkit: The Craft of the Working Playwright*, 6th ed. Heinemann Educational Books, 2000.
Wright, Michael. *Playwriting in Process: Thinking and Working Theatrically*. Heinemann, 1997.

Prose Fiction

The barriers to writing prose fiction are less obviously technical than writing for film and theater. The number of texts available to would-be fiction writers is truly enormous and can be grouped by genre and aim. You probably have your own models, since everyone has favorite novels. Here anyway are a few books catering to the self-directed writer. All are recent and arranged in the following order: for children; for adults; the mystery novel; the romance genres (or as the trade calls them, "bodice rippers"), and some career strategies for getting published. You can enlarge this arbitrary selection almost infinitely by entering your chosen keywords in the bookseller's search engine.

Selected Texts

Dils, Tracey E. *You Can Write Children's Books*. F & W Publications, Inc., 1998.
Frey, James N. *How to Write a Damn Good Novel: A Step-By-Step No Nonsense Guide to Dramatic Storytelling*. St. Martin's Press, 1987.
Frey, James N. *The Key: How to Write Damn Good Fiction Using the Power of Myth*. St. Martin's Press, 2002. (There is another "Damn Good" book by the same author on writing mysteries.)
Gotham Writers' Workshop, ed. *Writing Fiction: The Practical Guide from New York's Acclaimed Creative Writing School*. Bloomsbury USA, 2003.
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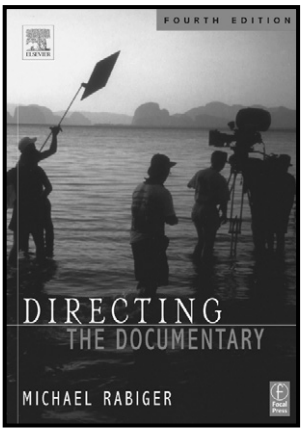

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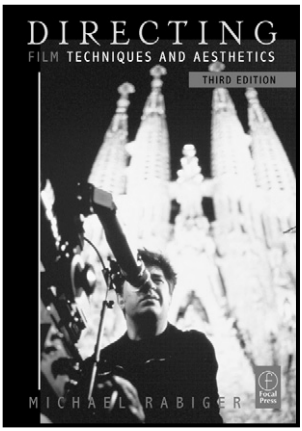

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